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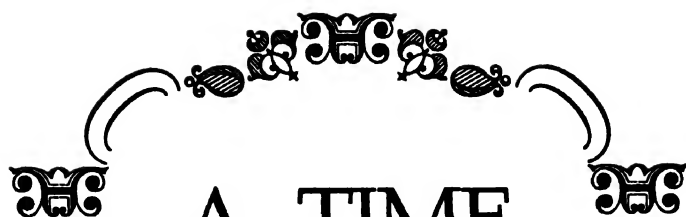
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**३ TO MAMU**





**A TIME TO BE HAPPY**



# ❧ *Part One* ❧

## CHAPTER I

❧ WE were walking past the Sharanpur Club one morning when Sanad said he wanted to give up his job with Selkirk and Lowe. There had been so many changes in Sharanpur during the months since Independence that his announcement did not surprise me as it might otherwise have done. It seemed a part of that slow tide of change, and his making it as we were passing the Club, symbolic.

I gestured toward the hedge with my walking-stick. "Look, Sanad, there are only two or three English children playing on the lawn."

Once there had been so many, watched over by their ayahs. It had made a pretty picture for the passer-by, the sight beyond that trim, boxy hedge: honey-skinned toddlers and dusky ayahs against sky-blue, emerald-green, and the flower-beds that were like bright ribbons of colour lacing the grass. The lawn had been the Club's pride, velvety and even, reserved for its members, the white sahibs of Sharanpur.

"Didn't you hear what I said?" asked Sanad, impatient.

I think he wanted me to argue that a job with a British firm was too prized a plum to throw away, and I did argue later. But just then Selkirk and Lowe seemed only a small

piece of the English pattern that was slipping away. I thought of all the years, the generations of careful moulding that had groomed Indians for it, providing them with the veneer and the gloss that had made them nearly English. The "Englishness" had been a matter for pride and prestige. It had meant so much in the old days. Cut off from it as I had chosen to be, I had viewed it objectively, and for me it had had an element of fantasy, with its *chota pegs*, its dressing for dinner, and its jokes repeated standing at a bar in a voice that must sound British to belong. What had it all to do with the life around us? I had often wondered. It might have been appropriate in Bombay or Calcutta, where city life had drawn English and Indian together in a curious mixture of modernity, but here in the U.P., the heart of India, where men still greet one another with "Rām Rām," where the carved images of many-armed gods and goddesses reign over the countryside on festival days, where Divali is still a blaze of earthen lamps, the "Englishness" had only seemed fantastic. It had had the incongruity of fluffy white lambs painted on to a massive, brooding landscape—an afterthought, and an absurd one, on the part of the artist. Yet there were many to whom that pattern alone had been real because they had known no other India. Sanad, whom I had known since he had been born, was one of these. He stood beside me now, this nearly English young man brought up to be a success, puzzled and uncertain about his future.

"What does your father say?" I asked him.

"You know Father. He's still living in the era of the Nawabs."

I smiled at this apt description of my old friend Govind Narayan. His unconcern with the world's problems reminded me of the celebrated Nawab who, when told that the British armies were forcing the gates of his city and that he must escape if he wished to live, had murmured plaintively: "Indeed I ought, but the servants have already fled and there is no one to fetch me my slippers."

"I am too old and set in my ways, Sanad," Govind Narayan has told his younger son, "to alter my views. You cannot expect me to enthuse about what I neither support nor understand. If this is the age of the common man, as you say, then I am not common enough for it, that is all. I must believe what I have always believed and live as I have always lived, provided this Government will allow me to."

And so he does, his measured tread covering the peaceful, soundless roads in the early mornings, his evenings spent on a *takht* in his rose-garden, the *hookah* beside him fragrantly bubbling its blend of choice tobacco. Govind Narayan regards all change as his personal enemy, plundering his peace.

"As for giving up your job, Sanad," he has said, "whom will such a gesture help? A career is not a house of cards you can tear down and build up again. You have your life to live, no matter what changes are taking place, and I want you to make a success of it."

"But, Father, the values that made for success twenty or even ten years ago are not the ones that count now—"

"Sit down, my son. You are too restless. You should come to Lucknow more often. We do not see enough of you, though Sharanpur is so close. Next time you come we shall sit in peace together and talk over all your difficulties. Besides, there are so many things I want to show you, things that will be yours and Girish's some day. I came by a book the other day hand-written in Persian. It is sixteenth-century, a thing of rare beauty. . . ."

"Have you spoken to Girish?" I asked Sanad.

Sanad's brother, Girish, now the youngest director of James McDermott and Company, embodies all that his father considers successful. I can picture him now, a white carnation in the buttonhole of his dinner-jacket, his elbow resting with familiar ease on the bar of one of Calcutta's rendezvous for the elite, looking and sounding very much like his uncle, Harish. "You really ought to come to Calcutta," I can hear him telling Sanad, as I have heard Harish telling Govind

Narayan in the past. "It's not like the old days, of course. Too many *dhotiwallas* about in places where they wouldn't have been before. Still, it does have some sort of atmosphere."

Sanad had discussed the question of his future with Girish.

"Give up your job? But whatever for, my dear chap?" was Girish's genuinely bewildered rejoinder. "Here, have another drink and stop talking nonsense."

"So you see," Sanad told me, "that's how Father and Girish feel about it."

"Well, what do you expect me to say?" I asked. "It's your problem."

"I know," he said, "but think about it."

That night, thinking about it took me back over the days of Sanad's childhood and the long process of moulding that had, paradoxically, brought him to this state of indecision.

This is really Sanad's story, but here, for clarity's sake, I must bring a little of my own history into it. Sharanpur is my birthplace. I was brought up here and still live here, though no longer in my father's house. Yet I cannot say this city has ever been home to me. The Botanical Gardens are a welcome oasis in a waste of soot-filled atmosphere. I use the word "waste" from Nature's point of view, not man's, for otherwise Sharanpur is, and has been since the early part of this century, a flourishing commercial city, its upper air laden with the grey-black haze that has now become synonymous with industrial civilization, its factories and textile mills churning out in vast quantity the goods that have brought it wealth.

Sharanpur—"City of Shelter"—a majestic name, but little more than a façade for many living within its bounds who know neither protection nor adequate sustenance all their days. Born amid grime, breathing factory smoke and the treacherous fluff of the cloth mills, they cannot even look up to a clear sky. My father's millhands were among these, for,

though my father was not an unjust employer, there was not at that time a proper appreciation of the worker's needs or any knowledge of the squalor of his working and living conditions. The fortunes founded in Sharanpur on cheap, plentiful labour were made not by unjust, but by unaware, men. The strata that divided society did not demand that the uppermost level be informed about the lower levels. Business enterprises prospered and money flowed in. There was no time to look beyond the accounts ledger. The millhands did their day's work for the meagre wage that was the standard of the time—I cannot recall the amount—and went home to heaven knew what hovels for a night's mockery of rest. Children were born and died among them with a mushroom rapidity, both processes as lightning swift as the city's growth to prosperity and its promotion to one of the important industrial towns of India. Still, Sharanpur was an Indian city, for all its industrial importance—Indian with an English gloss, as I have said, like Yorkshire pudding served on a *thal*.

I was an only child, but not a solitary one, for my uncle and his family lived with us. My father was a daring man who had crossed the "black water," as the voyage to Europe was known among the orthodox, and had refused to do penance for it on his return. My mother, though inwardly shocked by his refusal, had staunchly supported him against criticism, as she supported all his views and enterprises against the displeasure, I am sure, even of the gods. It was for her husband, she felt, to right his actions in the eyes of God. Like any good Hindu wife, she believed that his concern was with God and hers with God in him.

They had been married as children and had grown up together, never being separated except for Father's university education in England. Mother was not beautiful, but in a match arranged by one's elders beauty is of little importance compared with the wifely virtues. Who could tell whether a little girl would grow up comely? Whereas, temperament and inclination were early defined, and it was possible to foretell

them to some extent. Those who matched my mother and father did well. They were wonderfully suited to each other. In spite of their disagreements, and there must have been some in a marriage that lasted fifty years, they adjusted to each other's foibles, maintaining an outward harmony that controlled the rhythm of the entire household. One might say they were compelled to maintain it, because marriage, among us, is for life, and those who do not adjust to its ups and downs must forever remain unhappy. My parents were too positive and wholesome to lead negative lives fretting over what could not be altered. If they were under any compulsion to behave with consideration toward each other, then that compulsion, I am convinced, was a very good thing, and I should like to see more of it today. Because my father was unorthodox in some respects, people said he had paved the way for his son to become a rebel, too, and this, in a small way, is what I did become.

It may have been the contrast between poverty and plenty—the poverty I saw all about me, and the plenty I enjoyed in my father's house, where food was prepared in pure, nourishing *ghee*, and milk and meat and home-made butter were plentiful—which sculptured itself in bold relief on my childhood memory and later, during my student days, impelled me toward the national movement. The movement, far from being a purely political one, was a great social organization, too, a channel whereby even the least political-minded could help to alleviate the awe-inspiring distress of the poor of our land. I myself was never of a political turn of mind, or I might not be sitting here today in my solitary cottage, spending my hours among my books and papers, instead of seeking office in government or joining one of the numerous official and semi-official organizations that have sprung up since Independence. I worked as long as youth and health permitted, and now I am content to enjoy my leisure. I do not consider this selfish. I have earned my rest.

Gandhi's national movement was nearly as young as I was



in those days, and it was natural that I, of recently awakened conscience, and it, of a new-born, throbbing vitality, should have been drawn together, each seeking the other's strength. For me it was the clarion call that drew me out of my adolescent confusions and threw open my future course, whereas it in turn sought me out eagerly, for it was a growing thing and had need of many like me if it would expand to maturity. Its leader was just a name to me, for I had never seen him, but the words he spoke about village India, her desperate plight, her crushing burdens of debt, seemed to echo in the urban tragedy I saw all around me. Though later I worked in the villages, my first arousal was to the city's need.

Gandhi made symbols of the lowliest commodities, salt and cloth, both vital necessities of life, and both heavily taxed. Make your own salt, he said, and spin your own cloth. When I adopted *khadi*, I made, I felt, the first major decision of my life, for mill-made cloth was my family's source of income and my own future inheritance. In choosing to wear *khadi* I surrendered forever my rightful claim to my inheritance and, in doing so, severed all contact with my father's business. My first cousin is now owner of the mills, and I wish him well. He is a far better businessman than I ever could have been. From the haven of my treasured privacy and freedom I do not envy him his responsibilities: the making of policies, the attending of conferences, and all the worries that must accompany the continuing success of a commercial enterprise.

From the time I gave up my inheritance I became more or less of a vagabond, yet always welcome in my father's house, for my family were dear to me, and they loved me, their only child. My wanderings took me all over the United Provinces, and my work, guided by the directives of local Congress committees, took me into the villages more and more. I spent little time in the cities except on my return from each mission, when I compiled reports of my activities.

As a youngster, and later too, I had my share of skirmishes

with the authorities for defying the laws that Gandhi's "civil disobedience" campaigns bade his followers defy. Once I was imprisoned in Sharanpur, and on my release the magistrate, an Englishman who was my father's friend, cautioned me against my wilfulness. He was loath to treat me like an "irresponsible lawbreaker," he said, for did I not have some "background" and "breeding" to lead me along more constructive paths? He hoped I would forget all this "nonsense" and settle down to learning the business of running my father's mills. But could I, drunk with the nectar of self-sacrifice, heed the sober admonitions of a British magistrate, and what were the mills to me when I had espoused the cause of the labour they employed?

Tom Grange, a young Englishman who had just come out to Sharanpur at that time to join his firm's factory, was another of those who could not understand my ways. Tom labelled much of what he saw and heard in India as "extraordinary," as indeed it must have seemed to one innocent of both the background of Indian affairs and the peculiar intricate structure of Indian psychology. Tom is still in Sharanpur, now the head of his firm, but we have drifted apart through the years and seldom meet. Still, I remember as though it were yesterday his baffled tone in speaking of Gandhi, his attempts to analyse what he saw going on around him, and his eventual decision to disregard the whole complicated rigmarole and live his life just as if he had never left his native shores—though in a good deal more comfort than he could have known in England. There he was Tom Grange, anonymous British subject living in a numbered house in a row of similar houses. Here he was Somebody. Though Number Four in his firm, he was a person of some consequence, and it was only a matter of time until he would be Number Three, Two, and then One, entitled as he went along to greater privileges. They were considerable even then, for, though in England he could not have afforded the membership of a single club or even have been considered eligible

for one, here he belonged to two. In England his wife, Dora, would probably have had to do her own cooking and cleaning, while here she had untold leisure and servants to wait on her.

When I first met Tom he had come out to India full of natural curiosity about a new country. As time went on, he began to accept the dictates of his fellow countrymen more and more with regard to the things that were "done" and the things that were "not done." "Take it from me," one or another of his friends would say to him, and Tom took it from him. So the traditional pattern of behaviour in India had been handed on from one generation of Englishmen to the next, and each newcomer had carried it forward. Tom, who had come out to earn his living, gradually began to feel he was doing much more. He convinced himself that his very presence was accomplishing a mission.

I don't know when this realization altered, ever so slightly, the tilt of his head, or when the authoritarian ring subtly crept into his voice. So imperceptible were the changes that I don't think he noticed them himself, but from them there emerged another Tom Grange, and it was during this process that we drifted apart. Tom took less and less interest in the happenings around him. Dora had her mahjong and her bridge, and he had his games. For the rest, he was content to leave the Indian scene to the politicians and administrators who had till then so ably held the Empire together. It was the philosophy of most Englishmen, for they knew no way to untangle the web of life they saw before their eyes.

I first met Tom when he came to see my father on a business matter for his firm. Father liked him and encouraged my friendship with him, thinking that a young businessman with sporting interests would be good company for me. Of course I had already joined the Congress, so there was no question of bringing me back into the family fold, but I suppose Father had hopes I might change my mind. He also had that profound and total admiration for all things British which

so many of our people seem to carry about with them like a talisman, clinging to it as a refuge from Indian orthodoxy. He was sure that Tom might in due course instil some common sense into my attitudes. This never did happen because Tom became more unbendingly British and I more resolutely Indian as time went by, but during those early days when he was new to India and interested in all that was going on we did discuss the Indian scene freely.

The newspapers at that time had pictures of Gandhi going to the Viceroy's House in Delhi wearing nothing but a loin-cloth. Tom was aghast that anyone should converse with His Majesty's representative in this "outlandish" garb. As we sat over a cup of coffee together one Sunday morning—I could not offer him beer, as my mother kept no alcoholic beverages in the house—I pointed out to him that Gandhi had gone to attend the Round Table Conference in England in the same manner, travelling in the ship's second class and abiding by his usual strict regulations for living and eating. In London, I told Tom, he had lived in the East End, of all places. He had even gone to Buckingham Palace in a loin-cloth.

"The fellow is obviously an eccentric," remarked Tom placidly.

I sensed that this was the most damning judgement he could have passed on any man. To Tom, Gandhi was an odd type who refused to dress properly, and India was full of them. In a country where a great many strange things were always happening, he was just another of them. He certainly did not represent any threat to the British Raj, and nobody in his right mind regarded him or his ideas as dangerous.

"He's pledged to non-violence, isn't he?" demanded Tom. "A few prayers on his part aren't going to do any harm."

It was clear that the picture of this "unimposing-looking chap" dressed in nothing but a loin-cloth and talking of freeing his country from the foreign yoke was vastly entertaining

to Tom and his friends, especially when viewed, *chota peg* in hand, from the places of high authority and secure prestige. Not that Tom belonged to any such exalted circle himself, but apparently those who knew those who did assured him that in Delhi nobody attached the slightest significance to these goings-on.

"He's a religious type, as far as I can see," Tom said.

And the Indians, I finished for him inwardly, couldn't have enough of religion. In a way Tom was right. Any naked, bedraggled-haired fraud of a sadhu covered with ashes could attract a formidable following and hypnotize it into obedience. From the point of view of an Englishman new to India, Gandhi was no more of a novelty or a danger than any wandering ascetic had been in India's history.

"He has tremendous influence," Tom conceded, "and what he says is law, but that doesn't make him dangerous. It just makes him a nuisance. At any rate, as long as he decides to fast every time the people disobey his creed of non-violence, and as long as the Indians have no intention of letting him die of starvation, the Raj is safe!

"You know," he went on, "it's not very different from the sort of thing that goes on in Hyde Park on Saturday afternoons. One doesn't bother about the soap-box orators. One listens to them and then goes on one's way."

The Raj, Tom believed, had withstood opposition before, and it would survive Gandhi. In my heart I was not convinced otherwise. I was not, in fact, particularly concerned about the political outcome of Gandhi's struggle. I could not imagine an India where the rupee would not be stamped with the impression of an English monarch and where it would not always be a privilege to be a white sahib. Somehow one does not picture dramatic changes taking place in one's own lifetime.

"If you think he is so unimportant, then why give him stature by putting him in prison? Why not just ignore him?" I asked.

Discipline, Tom argued, Law and Order—the Empire's gift to her colonies—had to be maintained.

"What I can't understand," Tom said, "is that when people are given a choice between going to jail and paying a fine, they choose jail. How do you explain that?"

"Most of them probably haven't the money to pay the fine," I told him.

"What about fellows like yourself?" he asked.

"Well, going to jail is part of the battle. It is a form of service."

"What, sitting around idle for months on end?"

"There's work to be done in jail," I pointed out. "A sentence of rigorous imprisonment, for instance, means hard work at the mills or oil presses or, if one can choose, spinning."

"Spinning?" Tom echoed blankly.

And on this subject, one of my favourites, I was able to enlarge, explaining to him what spinning and the production of hand-made cloth would mean to the average Indian.

"Not a bad idea," said Tom, surprising me. "Keeps people busy and out of mischief. Better than running around shouting slogans. If Gandhi thinks he's preparing people for freedom that way, so much the better. That's just what the Government says: get ready for freedom and you can have it."

He quoted the "grand old maxim" of Edmund Burke's, that when a colony was ready for independence it automatically achieved it, just as a ripe fruit of its own accord dislodged itself from the tree that had nourished it.

"The question is," I ventured, "who is nourishing whom?"

Tom's sense of humour was not his strong point. "When you get down to brass tacks," he informed me, "the Indians aren't ready for independence by a long shot. Good heavens, it needs no argument. One only has to look around."

Occasionally, as he drove between his well-furnished home and his cool, spacious office or the Club, where he played tennis and golf, I think Tom did glance around. He was con-

vinced that the Indians were not ready to govern themselves. Oh, there were a growing number, he conceded, who spoke good English and had had the ideals of Western democracy instilled into them in school. He was fond of pointing out as an example Romesh, a young Bengali his firm had just recruited. As fine a lad as his counterpart in England, he was thoroughly presentable. He played a jolly good game of tennis and held his drink like a man. The Company was employing his type more and more, and very able representatives they were proving, too, which just went to show what the right school and a Western upbringing could do. But these were few compared with the millions who were illiterate and lived on the brink of starvation.

Tom's arguments always ended: "Of course, if everyone had your education and your standard of living . . ."

Talking to him, I could voice only my own opinions, not those of even my closest Indian friends, for I had too many friends who agreed with him, too many who assiduously avoided any entanglement in politics. Some stayed away simply because it would have been foolish and impractical to invest in a venture that looked like an absurd gamble from the start. My own father was among these. He was neither cowardly nor unpatriotic. He was, in private, a sincere though silent admirer of Gandhi, but he was human, and his comforts were dear to him. While not actively supporting the Raj, he did not actively oppose it. He merely continued to live his leisurely, neutral life. My good friend Govind Narayan was another of these, and no one else I knew clung so tenaciously to his comforts.

"Obviously I have accumulated merit in my previous incarnations," he would say to humour my serious approach, "or I should not have been born into the pleasant life I now enjoy. I should be a bad Hindu if I did not live as my birth and position intended me to."

Govind Narayan's father and mine had known each other well and had visited back and forth between Lucknow and

Sharanpur. Even after I joined the Congress, cutting myself off from old connections simply because my work left me little time to cultivate them, Govind Narayan would not let our friendship slide into forgetfulness. I was always a welcome visitor to his house, even after Harish, his brother, was posted to Lucknow as Deputy Collector and I, as a rebel, however non-violent, became a frequent source of embarrassment to him.



## CHAPTER II

☞ I SUPPOSE Govind Narayan and I got on so well together because we were so unlike. There was no room in such a relationship for rivalry or conflict. There would not have been even had our lives not been led along such different paths. Ours was, in a way, a one-sided friendship, and if friendship were a thing of weights and balances, I should more than once have reflected how much I received from him and how little I gave him in return. I envied him his unassailable calm and wished I were not harassed by the urge to be up and doing all the time. The brash among us venture in our enthusiasms to change the world or to leave upon it some impress of our own personalities. The wise, such as Govind Narayan, are content to mould their own small portion of it.

I cannot picture Govind Narayan anywhere but in Lucknow. The feudal courts of the Muslim Nawabs had vanished, taking with them the languid luxury of their princely setting, but Lucknow still reflected the faded grandeur of an era when courtesy had been cultivated as a pastime and the improvisation of a couplet had been the hallmark of a gentleman. Men such as Govind Narayan, secure in the comfort inherited from generations of landowning forebears, were content to bask in that lingering reflection. The British Raj was there, it was true, an indelicate reminder of conquest, but gentlefolk did not dwell on so graceless a fact. Life had to be lived, daughters suitably wedded, and sons established in good jobs. These goals could best be achieved by taking a sensible view of the situation, accepting the Raj, and using it to one's own advantage. Govind Narayan, for all his air of

detachment from the humdrum, was an intensely practical person.

"You have not seen Harish since he was posted here," he said to me as we sat in the courtyard of his home one winter morning in 1932.

The house had been built by Govind Narayan's grandfather when the family had moved from the old part of the city to the modern section, but there was nothing modern about its architecture. It had grown up around a central courtyard, with a wing added here, a verandah built there as its master had thought fit. It had a crumbling elegance enhanced by an occasional latticed window, an arched doorway, lofty ceilings, and mosaic floors. Its furnishings now combined the best of both European and Indian worlds, a constant reminder to me that happy compromise was the key to Govind Narayan's character.

"Will you come to dinner tomorrow night?" Govind Narayan asked. "Harish and Maya are coming."

I had not seen them for years. "Has Harish changed?" I asked.

"He is just as he was," said Govind Narayan, and added with a twinkle: "Perhaps a little more so."

Harish's *bara sahib* ways were a standing joke between us. We had often laughed over his classic phrase: "My dear fellow, to tell you the truth, I'm far more at home in Paris or Rome than in the South." By the South he meant South India, and this vast piece of territory began for him just outside the southern boundary of Lucknow. Naturally he excluded Bombay and Calcutta from this definition: they were cities after the European pattern. In Lucknow, though he felt a little uncomfortable because he spoke Urdu haltingly, he was at least in the North, where he had been born and bred.

Govind Narayan and I teased him mercilessly about his unshakeable faith in the foreign label and his implicit belief in foreign advice and opinion. We had never known him to go to an Indian specialist for treatment of any complaint.

"Vienna is the place for that," he would insist, or "There's no better clinic than the one in Zurich" or Budapest or Berlin, depending on the illness in question. It was as if the white man, weary for a little while of his burden, had passed it on to Harish and he felt it an inestimable privilege to stagger under it. If this sounds at all derogatory to Harish, it is not intended in that spirit. He was a likeable man and a loyal friend. If he felt alienated from his immediate surroundings, it was no wonder. Considering the education he and many like him had received—myself included—it was surprising that he fitted into his surroundings at all. We, the nearly English of my generation, were better qualified to quote Shelley and Shakespeare and discourse on many an aspect of English life and letters than we were even to recognize what was our own. Govind Narayan had turned instinctively, and I deliberately, to our own heritage, but Harish had never felt the need of it. Govind Narayan, though he laughed at his younger brother, sincerely admired him. He would not for all the world have changed places with him, but from his own stately cultural milieu he applauded Harish's ambition.

"You will see," he said when we had finished reminiscing about Harish's idiosyncrasies. "He will be a success."

Ammaji, Govind Narayan's mother, sitting with us, shell-ing almonds and pine nuts, looked up. "He is a success," she said coolly, "one of the most successful creations of the British Raj."

"Ammaji is taking to politics," said Govind Narayan, amused. "Tell us why you object to the Raj."

"The Raj!" she echoed scornfully. "It does not concern me. I am merely marvelling at the alchemy by which it transforms my children and grandchildren into strangers. Look at Harish."

Here was a man, she was fond of remarking about Harish, whose traditions were as remote from Britain's as any could be, whose intrinsic temperament and attitudes bore not the slightest resemblance to those of the British, yet whose entire

outlook and manner had been so moulded as to leave not the suspicion of an Indian about him. Had his complexion not been darker than the Englishman's, not one distinguishing feature would have existed to vouch for his separate identity. She made no secret of the fact that Govind Narayan was her favoured son.

"Maya may not come tomorrow night," said Govind Narayan. "She has not been keeping well."

"There is nothing the matter with her that a baby would not cure," said Ammaji.

With regard to his career, Harish's single mistake had been to marry a woman who could not be a graceful hostess to his European friends. Maya had never learned to dance or play tennis. She was not shy. She was stiff. People said it was a shame that a man so obviously intended for advancement should have so apathetic a wife.

Ammaji picked up the tray of nuts and carried it over to Govind Narayan's chair. She sorted a handful and held them out to him. "Here, eat these."

"Not just now, Ammaji," he protested. "I'm enjoying my smoke."

"Eat," she commanded, pressing them into his palm. Picking up her tray, she carried it into the house, her small figure very erect. She was the only member of the Shivpal family who did not summon a servant to do what she could easily do herself.

"It is a pity about Maya," said Govind Narayan slowly. "She is such a sweet girl. I feel sorry for her."

I said nothing. Pity was not a word I should have applied to Maya. One did not pity a slab of marble.

"Did you see my new bronze as you came through the drawing-room?" he asked suddenly.

"No. I came by the side entrance."

"Then you must see it."

He called for a servant, and the bronze address was carried

out and set up on the table between us. She was perhaps two feet high, and from the depths of my low armchair I saw her black-brown shape voluptuously etched against the sapphire sky.

Govind Narayan ran a loving hand over her. "Well, what do you think of her?" His voice held the vibrant note it had whenever he acquired a new and beautiful object for his house.

I made the mistake of asking whether it was an old piece.

"What does it matter?" he said impatiently. "Is she not exquisite? It is relaxation just to look at her."

As he stood there, himself outlined against the sky, his hand encircling the goddess's waist, I thought how different he was from Harish, for whom relaxation meant a cigar and a glass of port or, if the energetic mood seized him, to fling himself about the tennis court in pursuit of physical fitness. There was little time or inclination in Harish's life to pause in wonder or admiration. How strange that Govind Narayan had so set his heart on his sons following in their uncle's footsteps.

"Suppose"—I put it to him suddenly—"that Girish or Sanad wanted to paint or write?"

"It would be a worth-while thing. There are no more rewarding ways of using leisure. There is too little interest in the arts among the young."

"I meant as a living, not as a hobby."

"They would not want to," he said with conviction. "They have shown no desire to so far, and they have not been brought up that way. Plum trees do not bear grapes."

I met Harish the following morning, as it happened. I had to tour the rural area outside Lucknow with a group of Congress workers, and we found ourselves accompanied by Harish. It was apparently his official duty to escort us. In solar topee, well-cut suit, and sturdy walking-shoes, he greeted me cordially.

"Still trying to upset the scheme of things," he said in his impeccable Oxford accent. "I'm coming along to see no damage is done."

"You needn't," I told him. "We're just making a survey to see what material we can find in the way of village industries."

"I know, my dear chap, I know. But I'm not taking any chances. There's been enough trouble since I came here. I'd better come along. Can't have you agitators roaming the villages alone," he said, at his jocular best.

My companions, *dhoti*-clad and bare-headed like myself, looked at the Deputy Collector sahib as though he were a being from another planet.

"Tell him," said one of them to me, "the road gets bad, very bad, further up. The car will be no use."

"I know all about the roads in this area," said Harish, irritated. "Why are we wasting time standing here? I've got a mountain of files waiting for me in my office."

The man shrugged, and we piled into Harish's car at his own insistence. After a few bumpy miles the car and the chauffeur had to be left by the roadside. It was an unusually hot morning for December. Our cross-country tramp left us tired and perspiring.

Harish upbraided me for the excursion when I met him that night at dinner. "I've done that area half a dozen times before, but I'm damned if I've done it on foot."

"It's not my fault if your car could not take the road," I said.

"A bullock cart couldn't take that road," he grumbled. "You refused to keep to the road. I've had a raging headache all day. I had to stay in office till all hours getting through my files, and I missed my billiard game at the Club. What an idiotic waste of time! I hope you'll give me some warning if the performance is going to be repeated."

"It's all over," I assured him. "I shall be leaving for Sharanpur tomorrow morning and coming back here in a week's

time to set up an office for the Rural Development Board. We are thinking of starting a small shop to sell village products like the one we have in Sharanpur."

"You and those Congress-wallas?" said Harish, refusing to acknowledge that I was one of them. "Why you want to start a small shop to sell bits of straw matting and the like when you can be running the biggest mill in Sharanpur is something I shall never understand."

"I feel more at home with the matting," I told him.

"Oh, my dear fellow, really!"

We were sitting in Govind Narayan's drawing-room after dinner. There had been too much to eat, and the room with the curtains drawn against the evening chill was too warm. A long plume of ash hung perilously from the end of Harish's cigar. He looked much happier with his long legs stretched out comfortably than he had looked that morning, scarlet and perspiring.

"You're wasting your time with your straw matting," he advised me. "The best thing to do with a situation is to adapt yourself to it. It's no good trying to identify yourself with the Congress-wallas, you're not one of them. What do you think, Govind? You can't have it all one way. Either you've got to admit the situation has certain definite advantages and put up with the pinpricks, or you must reject everything—and that means all this."

The "situation" Harish referred to was the presence of the Raj, and "all this," indicated with a flourish of his well-groomed hand, included the opulence of his brother's green-and-gold drawing-room, the sumptuous dinner we had just consumed, and the cigar he now held, offered to him by Govind Narayan from a box of imported Havanas.

Since Govind Narayan was in complete agreement with him and had no intention of giving up anything, and since I had not the will-power just then to argue the point, the discussion trailed off in an agreeable cloud of expensive smoke. Lakshmi, our hostess, disliking the smell of cigars, left us,

her silk sari rustling, to retire for the night. I did not care for cigar smoke myself, but put my dislike down to the fact that the sort of life I had led for many years was far removed from the realm of drawing-room conversation and all that went with it. It was only when I came to Govind Narayan's that I had a glimpse of this realm. Otherwise I had, to all intents and purposes, rejected "all this." I had given up smoking and drinking, not from prudery but because these pastimes no longer fitted into my life. Perhaps I had remained unmarried for the same reason, for what woman would want to take second place to a spinning-wheel or a mud hut? I had never thought to inflict such a fate on anyone I knew.

"Young Sanad started tennis yet?" Harish asked.

"No. He has been waiting for you to give him lessons," said Govind Narayan.

"How's Veena? I haven't seen the little minx for a long time." Harish was fond of his nephews, but his six-year-old niece was his favourite.

The pause was filled with the bubble of Govind Narayan's *hookah*.

"I'm worried about Maya," said Harish. "I think I'll get Kruger to look at her. He's come out from Vienna. One of their top gynaecologists, I understand. I think he's in Delhi now."

"Dr. Mehra at the hospital here is excellent," suggested Govind Narayan. "Lakshmi went to him when Veena was born. She thinks well of him."

"Since Kruger is coming here in any case, Maya may as well go to him."

I sat wrapped in my own thoughts, pleasantly drowsy and conscious of my too full stomach, listening to their murmured remarks as from a great distance. Tomorrow I would be on my way back to Sharanpur and my work. But that other life had little reality in this room with the lamplight glistening on the silky Kashmir carpet at our feet and diffusing all the room in its soft radiance. Half in shadow on her



pedestal stood the bronze goddess, one hand upraised in a timeless gesture. For her, as for Govind Narayan, tomorrow had no meaning. There was all eternity to admire and be admired. For Harish, it was different. Time was planned and apportioned to the last meticulously calculated minute up the sure path to success. A precious commodity, time, not something to be frittered in wanton fashion.

Harish got to his feet, ready to leave, and I, rousing myself with an effort, said good-night and left with him.

## CHAPTER III

☞ “D’YOU suppose if I practise terribly hard I’ll ever play at Wimbledon?” Sanad asked me. He had just started tennis and was only at the stage of hitting the ball against a wall, but his question was earnest.

“I don’t doubt it,” I told him.

We were sitting in the drawing-room of his home one December morning during his Christmas holidays. I had come to see Govind Narayan, but he was with his *munshi*, who had just arrived on his fortnightly visit with the land accounts. Knowing the *munshi*’s liking for ornamental phraseology, I judged it would be some time before Govind Narayan would be free. An unsuspecting onlooker might have taken the two of them for diplomats complimenting each other on the richness of their respective cultures. Actually their discussion was about rupees, annas, and pies, than which surely nothing could be more prosaic. I had settled down with a copy of the *Pioneer* when Sanad came in to keep me company.

“How did you do in your exams?” I asked him.

“I’ll pass,” he said, disinterested. “Girish is going to get a gold watch if he does well in his Senior Cambridge. Father said so.”

“Girish must be very pleased.”

“He isn’t,” Sanad told me. “He wants a sports car, but he can’t have that till he’s in college, and that’s years away.”

Ammaji had come into the room. “A sports car, a gold watch—such talk at the age of twelve! Girish is not thirteen yet,” she told me, greatly distressed. “And I cannot understand this education the boys are being given.”

“It is right for the times, Ammaji,” I said, knowing her aversion to the manner of her grandchildren’s upbringing.

"A good education, no matter in what language, can never do any harm."

"Who's talking about language?" she retorted. "Do they live in England that they know nothing of what goes on in their own country? Do they know what crops grow on their father's land, or even what this land was before the foreigner came to it? What kind of learning do they acquire in school?"

"I don't have to know all that to pass my examinations," said Sanad stoutly.

"What are you going to be, Sanad, after you've passed all your examinations?" I asked him.

"Something or other," he said vaguely.

There were few enough paths leading to the glittering cocktail-party-gymkhana-club-Government-House circuit upon which social recognition in British India depended. In time, one of these would be smoothed for him. Sanad had the lack of initiative all too common in the sons of the well-to-do. Some day, without undue exertion on his part, he would be a success. He fidgeted with the lapel of his blazer, eager to be off but waiting with the politeness his grandmother's presence commanded.

"Go and practise thy tennis," she said in gentle Urdu, and all her criticism of his upbringing vanished momentarily in the look that followed him as he left the room. "He has worth, that one," she said. She did not hide her favouritism.

Her attention wandered round the room, taking in each speck of dust, every stray thread and scrap on the carpet. Later the bearer would suffer for them. The room had changed considerably since the time when she had been its mistress, and she did not altogether approve of the full-bosomed bronze beauty who stood, gloriously nude, on a pedestal in one corner, or the block of stone sculpture, rescued from the ruins of an ancient temple, depicting a pair of lovers in a passionate embrace. It was all very well to read of the gods and goddesses coming to earth, assuming human

form, and behaving in a generally human fashion, but she did not want to be reminded of their lapses in her own drawing-room.

She was a diminutive figure in white, oddly austere in that opulent setting, and though she often talked of the days when she had been mistress of the house, I knew she had not enjoyed the position. The indolent, pleasure-loving man who had married her and brought her here had not understood her nun-like disdain of luxury, her stubborn refusal to submit to the mould in which he had tried to cast her. She had, in her youth, been a woman of character at a time when character was not admired in women of breeding, and later this had given way to a sharp criticism of all that she disapproved of in her husband and his home. The old gentleman, Govind Narayan's father, with his gentlemanly dislike of an argument, had regularly escaped from the possibility of it. In Paris, judging from the stories that were still told about him, he had been as dashing as any *boulevardier*, twirling his moustache and his cane as he sauntered along the Champs-Élysées. Now he had long been dead, but his views lived on in Harish to mock her.

"Govind Narayan will be free now," she told me. "I just heard the *munshi's tonga* leave."

I found Govind Narayan in the sunny, glass-enclosed verandah where he kept his books and papers. There was no desk in the room despite the fact that it served as an office during the cool months. Govind Narayan did his work in an easy chair, and the *munshi*, when he came, sat at his feet.

"You are back from Sharanpur," he said, smiling. "For a good long time, I hope."

"I've just set up an office here," I told him.

"Office?" He roused himself with an effort from the accounts he had been studying.

Govind Narayan was a mixture of an intensely practical man and an inveterate dreamer. The heady sweetness of December roses glowing in a bowl at his elbow mixed with a

lazy spiral of *hookah* smoke. He was dressed, as usual, in the lounging elegance of *pyjama-kurta*, one hand resting on the stem of his *hookah*, the other holding a pen poised above the notebook on his lap.

I reminded him about my work.

"You should work less," he told me, "and live more. . . . You must live here, not at that terrible hotel."

"Your house is much too comfortable," I said. "If I lived here, I should not have a care in the world or even remember why I am in Lucknow."

"That is just why I should like you to live here," he replied.

It was the closest we ever came to discussing my work or he to expressing an opinion about it.

"But you will have time during your crusade to visit us?" he insisted with gentle cynicism.

It was true of our country in those days that people completely unlike one another could meet and mingle on a friendly plane. A divergence of ideals was no bar to friendship, and there was none of the hostility in the air which opposing philosophies create among fellow men. Now a satirical fate seems to have turned the tables on us, and even those who share the same ideals and have in the past cheerfully borne burdens together are divided. There is no committee of which every member does not clamour to be president. We who were at one time willing followers must all needs be leaders or wither away with frustration.

I had plenty of time to visit the Shivpals. My "crusade" was brightened and enlivened by the children. I took them to Claudette's, where we had tea at glass-topped tables and ate cream buns.

"May I take a bun back for Rosie?" six-year-old Veena asked anxiously.

"Your ayah eats far too much as it is," said Girish before I could reply, and with that insistence on propriety which has never left him. "You can't carry food out of restaurants. What will people say?"

Veena and I had to smuggle it out, the sticky stain of cream buns spreading in the pocket of my *kurta*.

"Rosie is a Christian," Veena confided to me as we walked to the car ahead of her brothers. "Christians love buns. Rosie can't eat *chappati* all the time like the other servants."

I took the children shopping. At Christmas-time the European shops were decked with holly, toy evergreen trees, and great balls of cotton wool representing snow, which of course they had never seen. They were delighted with the festive decorations and wanted stockings like the stuffed ones they saw in the shops.

"They shouldn't have Christmas presents," Lakshmi protested. "As it is, they get too many at Dussehra and Divali. I think that's quite enough."

Lakshmi, who, as far as her religion was concerned, tried to keep European influences at bay, had to give in. Indulgence won the day, as it invariably did.

"Oh, well," said Lakshmi fondly, "they're only children."

Christmas Day in the shops was one thing, with its carefully contrived atmosphere of snowflakes and sleighbells, and quite another in the actual Lucknow winter, with its crisp, dry, sparkling air and warm sunshine, and the gardens luxuriant with flowers. In the parks laid out by the flower-loving Moghul emperors, beds of sweet peas on their reed-thin stalks shed a spicy-sweet aroma. Flame-coloured cannas flapped large satiny petals, and orange-and-black-striped tiger lilies stood like rows of soldiers, lifting fierce little faces to the shining day. Barkat trees dripped ancient roots from their branches into the deep old soil.

On Christmas Day I went with the Shivpal family on the sort of picnic only Govind Narayan could arrange.

"My dear chap," Harish said to his brother, as he watched the preparations being made, "you're taking everything but the tables and chairs."

"The only reason I'm not taking those is that we shall be

perfectly comfortable on rugs and cushions." Govind Narayan smiled. "A picnic does not mean we should be uncomfortable all day."

When Govind Narayan agreed to leave his house for an entire day, it could only be on his own terms. Harish and I watched him in amazement. Harish had been thinking in terms of a packet of sandwiches and a bottle of beer such as he had carried all over the English countryside during his student days, and I, who had travelled for days on end with no more luggage than I could conveniently fit into a small hold-all and carry myself, had similar ideas. For Govind Narayan a picnic was an outing, but that was the only way in which it differed from spending the day at home. If he could have lifted the roof off his house for the occasion, done away with the walls, and let the fresh air blow in from all sides, he would have done this rather than take the trouble to transport all his comforts a distance of several miles.

There was a hamper containing an elaborate English lunch in the car, and another containing an Indian meal. There were separate cartons of plates, cutlery, and linen. No paper plates or napkins for Govind Narayan. For one thing, it was impossible to serve Indian food on them, and, for another, they offended his aesthetic sense. "Paper containers completely destroy the flavour of the food," he said with finality when we suggested taking them along.

There were also several kinds of bottled drinks, parasols, books, newspapers, a gramophone, and records.

"But a picnic is a European idea," Harish protested. "One doesn't cart along the household with all its supplies."

"Obviously a European idea," remarked Ammaji. "Who else would wander off for the entire day and suffer untold inconveniences several miles from home when there is a perfectly good garden where one can enjoy the fresh air?"

"You are right, Ammaji," said Govind Narayan. "The only sensible way to set about it is to take everything one needs."

"All my needs are here within the house," she declared.

"What is there for me in the world outside? You who are young must enjoy yourselves. For me the worldly life is over and the time of contemplation begun."

Harish, who was always made uncomfortable by these protestations on his mother's part, said heartily: "Oh, nonsense, Ammaji, you must come. You can contemplate just as well out of doors—better, in fact."

Ammaji did not reply. She gave him a look and went indoors.

The loaded car had gone ahead with the children and the servants, and we followed in Harish's car. Only Harish was suitably dressed for a picnic, in flannels and a blue blazer. Maya's and Lakshmi's silk saris, ballooning about their legs in the breeze, made no concession to a day in the open air, and Govind Narayan was, as usual, in *pyjama-kurta*.

"I don't know why you women don't wear slacks," said Harish shortly, irritated by his mother's rebuff. "It would be so much more sensible."

"Who wants to be sensible when one can be pretty?" Lakshmi asked.

Maya said nothing. She was looking out of the window as though the procession of bullock carts on the road were the most absorbing sight in the world.

"Will you be going to Mussoorie as usual for the summer?" I put in, conscious of the need to fill the silence.

It was far too soon to talk of going to the hills. Lakshmi and the children did not leave Lucknow till May, and Maya, I presumed, would be going with them.

"I shall stay here," Maya said unexpectedly.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Harish. "There's no point in your staying in the gruelling heat. No one does who can get away."

"I don't mind the heat," said Maya.

"Minding or not minding a thing is very much one's own decision," agreed Govind Narayan. "Nothing would per-



suade me to go to the hills, but you aren't used to the heat, Maya."

"I'll get used to it," she replied calmly.

"What nonsense!" retorted Harish, honking his horn furiously to clear a path through a flock of sheep and goats.

"I was hoping you would come, dearest," said Lakshmi. "I would have had company. I get so tired of going for walks by myself, and the children, of course, have their own programme."

Lakshmi need never have gone for a walk by herself. She had innumerable invitations to attend all the fashionable summer events, but she never went to a party without Govind Narayan. It was amusing to watch her leave for Mussoorie each year with clothes and jewels enough to attend all the brilliant parties of the season, knowing she would not go to any. Jenkins's, where she always stayed, was a hotel frequented by the elite of North India. It had a large European clientele, too, and near by were the châteaux of the princes who made Mussoorie their summer playground. All this made no difference to Lakshmi.

"Mrs. Jenkins would have fussed over you and gone out of her way to make you comfortable."

Maya said nothing. It was a disconcerting habit she had, not replying when she did not feel like it. It left the speaker feeling annoyed. But Lakshmi was used to her sister-in-law's ways, and went on as though Maya had not ignored her invitation.

"What will you do with yourself?" she asked.

"I shall find something," Maya said, not abruptly, but somehow the words sounded ungracious.

"What nonsense!" repeated Harish, who, having steered clear of the sheep and goats, was driving along a broad, shady avenue. Now and then a friendly monkey swung gracefully down from his perch to watch our car go by.

We heard no more about Maya's plans that December

day, as we enjoyed the lunch Govind Narayan had provided and lay under the trees in sight of the ruins of the famous Residency. It was too lovely an afternoon to fritter away in argument, and knowing that an argument hung in the air like a storm-cloud between Maya and Harish, we avoided the subject of the summer. The *loo*, with its breath of fire, was, in any case, many months away, and we did not want to hasten its arrival even in our thoughts.

I played with the children, and we explored the ruins together. Harish slept while Maya and Lakshmi read the magazines and books they had brought. Only Govind Narayan seemed content to sit smoking, looking idly out over the garden, enjoying as though it had been a tangible thing the caressing orange-scented air. Once again I thought how very much at home he looked, and how ill-at-ease he would have been in any atmosphere but this. He would have disliked the impersonal hubbub of a city such as Bombay or Calcutta—he did not even like Sharanpur—where people had forgotten how to cultivate the art of leisure, and where in return for modernity they had to live cooped in flats, disturbed by the roar of traffic. Even the hills could not lure him from Lucknow.

## CHAPTER IV

☛ LAKSHMI never used the telephone if she could help it. Her note arrived at my hotel one morning asking me to have tea with her that day. I thought it unnecessary, for I spent nearly every evening at the Shivpals' and needed no invitation to visit them, but when I arrived at the house and found her on the lawn with tea for the two of us laid under the trees, I knew there was something she wanted to discuss.

"Now see what you've done!" she said, looking upset. "Maya wants to work in a village. One of your villages."

She called it my village because since I had set up an office for the Rural Development Board in Lucknow, I had been put in charge of the development of that area.

"There's no harm in it. One or two quite respectable people are going in for it," I told her.

"It's not a laughing matter," she scolded. "Don't you see it's tactless of her? It's embarrassing for Harish with her getting mixed up in the Congress programme. Why can't she join a music circle or a literary society or something he'll approve of?"

"She may not be musical or literary," I offered.

"If you are going to joke about it, it's no good my having asked you here. I wanted your advice."

Lakshmi looked very pretty sitting there in cool printed georgette, jewels sparkling in her ears, her attention divided between me and the voices of her children across the garden. It was not surprising that she was concerned about Maya's desire to work in a village. Lakshmi's whole world was here within beckoning distance.

"I spoke to Maya this morning. She says the programme consists of teaching people how to spin. Is that all she is

going to do, go all that way just to teach people how to spin? She doesn't know how to herself. She told me she has just started."

"She doesn't have to be expert," I told Lakshmi. "She only has to know the method and be able to demonstrate it reasonably well."

Lakshmi poured tea into a flower-patterned cup for me and, helping herself to a guava, nibbled it absently. "I don't understand it," she said, worried. "She isn't interested in anything Harish likes. She never goes to the Club with him, and she is always tongue-tied at parties. And now this. You cannot imagine what she was looking like this morning. I was shocked. She had taken off her bangles and rings and was wearing a sari plainer than I would permit my maidservant to appear in. She looked like a--widow. As it is, she's not pretty."

I thought of Maya's sculptured, immobile look. She was not pretty, but she might have been beautiful had she smiled more often. Unlike Lakshmi with her pigeon-like gentleness, Maya neither charmed nor attracted.

"I know it is not easy for her," Lakshmi continued, nibbling anxiously, "with no children and nothing to do in the house, but why must she make things worse than they are?" She hesitated, then asked: "What exactly is your work?"

The question was so like Lakshmi. I had known her since she had come as a bride to this house. I was her husband's closest friend. She knew all there was to know about my family, its financial and social status, its industrial prominence, and yet she knew nothing of my personal life or the work I had been doing for years. She knew it had something to do with the villages, but she did not take it seriously. Some rich men were eccentric. My interest in the villages was an eccentricity on my part. By birth I belonged in her own world, so what I chose to do, though it was peculiar, did not mar me in her eyes. Moreover, her question was rhetorical. She did not want an answer. Her hesitation in asking it

showed that she did not really mean to pry. It was only because of Maya that she had asked it at all.

"There is no mystery about it," I assured her. "The idea is to encourage the arts and crafts of the villagers, and eventually to sell their products in the cities so that they will make a little extra money that way. We begin by teaching them to spin so that they can some day spin all the yarn they want for their own needs."

"I see," said Lakshmi dubiously. "Is that all you do?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Harish says some of the women who go in for this work wear *pyjama-kurta*. It isn't necessary, is it? You don't think Maya might start dressing like a man?"

I smiled at her dismay. That Harry's wife—the gay, sporting Harry his English friends knew—should go about in that garb, as likely as not made of the unsightly homespun cloth of the Congress workers, would, I knew, cause more commotion than if she were to shave her head and renounce the world. That, however alarming, would at least be in a revered religious tradition. But this, savouring of unwholesome politics, would be a deplorable breach of taste, a social error of the worst kind. Harish would never live it down.

"Why can't she take singing lessons?" Lakshmi said with a sigh. "There is a marvellous teacher here from Benares. He has even taught Mrs. Raina to sing—oh, not well enough for parties, but just for her own pleasure, and it gives her something to do. If Mrs. Raina can learn to sing, anyone can. I've tried to talk to Maya, but she's so unapproachable."

She had finished her guava, seeds and all, and helped herself to another.

"Can't you do something about it?" she pleaded.

She looked very much like her own small daughter. Veena wanted cream buns for Rosie, and Lakshmi wanted them for Maya. Only, there were people, and Maya was among them, who did not like cream buns. I told Lakshmi so.

"You have not even been listening," she despaired. "What

has it got to do with buns? Won't you tell me what we should do about it?"

She was right. I had not been listening. I had been thinking of the first time I saw Maya, a very young, very shy bride, not raising her eyes to look at her groom. The red material of her sari was drawn low over her forehead. I could not see her face clearly as she sat cross-legged before the fire, only the glittering heart-shaped ornament that hung on her forehead, and below it her straight thick eyebrows, incredibly black in her pale skin. My mind went even further back, to the days before the wedding.

I had been a member of the *barat* party that had accompanied Harish in state to fetch his bride from her father's house. There had been a great deal of laughter and drinking and revelry during the days before our departure from Lucknow, as there always is on these occasions. Harish's father had, among other festivities, held a *mushaira* at his house. I remember the old gentleman, slim and distinguished with his flowing moustache and his courtly manner, moving among his guests and receiving their congratulations. All the eminent poets and a great many would-be poets were there that evening, and if it was not the most orderly and intellectual *mushaira* I have ever attended, it was certainly the most delightful. Harish was toasted both in scintillating verse and in wine, and I do not know which was the more heady of the two.

Our host urged *pān* on us, and the mild intoxication of its scented spices gave an added impetus to our creative mood.

"This is good *pān*," I remember telling him.

"Dear boy," he corrected me, "it is superlatively good. In the days of the Nawabs much depended on the making of *pān*. Just such a *pān* as this"—he held up a silver-covered cone—"has raised many an unknown female of the harem to the position of favourite concubine." His eyes twinkled. "Language is hard put to it to chant the beauties of this *pān*. But you are young and have much to learn."

As the evening wore on, the warmth of the room and the poetry, growing more erotic, combined with the romantic significance of the occasion, served to flush our cheeks and loosen our tongues. Several of us undid the top buttons of our *shervanis*, and some discarded them altogether. Bright-coloured pyjama tassels gleamed through transparent white muslin *kurtas*. *Pān* and cigarettes left an acrid taste in the mouth, starting a thirst that only more wine could quench. Velvet cushions slid to the floor as some of the guests made themselves more comfortable, and even the most prosaic among us blossomed into poetry that night.

Having had more drink than I was accustomed to, I did not lag behind in the creative contest. I don't know from what source I produced verse, and suddenly Govind Narayan, getting up from the divan on which he had been reclining, stood and replied to it in a floodtide of inspiration. For a full twenty minutes we two flung couplet upon couplet into the air—I starting, he replying to my sally—our language growing more elaborately classic, our delivery more flawless, until our inexhaustible reservoir aroused the traditional adniring burst of "Wah! Wah!" from our companions gathered there.

Flushed with heat and success, we sat down amid laughter and congratulation. Then we realized that Harish, for whom our eloquence had been intended, had not understood a single word. It needed just one glance between us, in our carefree mood, to convulse us in paroxysms of laughter. This time our laughter was uproarious, the tears streaming from our eyes, till, weak from it, we stumbled blindly toward each other through the throng. We embraced and feebly patted each other's backs in fellow feeling, coughing and spluttering still at our private joke, but by this time the recitation had been taken up by another of the guests, and the last line of each couplet was being repeated by the company with much fervour and wagging of heads.

Govind Narayan and I sat down where we were, some-

where in the middle of the room, our arms still around each other's shoulders, and fell into another uncontrollable fit of laughter, but our shouts went unnoticed in the applause and comment around us. Gasping, I reached for my handkerchief. Finding that I did not have one, I drew Govind Narayan's fine muslin one from his pocket, and we shared it to wipe our faces. I have known happier occasions in my life, but none so unrestrainedly hilarious.

As the night wore on and the poets grew drowsy, music and singing took the place of recitation. In an adjoining room someone plucked the strings of a *tanpura*, and their vibration throbbed languidly upon the stillness and trailed away. Framed in one dome-shaped window, the fragile curve of a young moon hung suspended in the starlit night. All of a sudden, time stood still and the resonant beat of the *tabla*, echoing our own heartbeat, was the only sound in the silence. Then a singer's exquisitely trained voice rose and blossomed note by note, flower-like, to entrance us with its perfection. Hilarity had given way to a mood of languor, and desire hung on the air, warm, moist, and clinging. Some of us sank back among the cushions, succumbing to the atmosphere, while others listened raptly to the music, but Harish, now that the poetizing was over, was in a talkative mood, and he upbraided the astrologers and all the stars in their separate constellations for decreeing that his marriage ceremony should take place in the morning.

"In the morning," he kept repeating to all who would listen, and of course there was no constraint among us, as there were no women present. "The ceremony will be held at half past ten in the morning."

He swayed imperceptibly as he rose to his feet, a strikingly handsome figure in his *shervani* of cream-coloured silk set off by a purple-and-silver *safa*.

"And what do they expect me to do"—he gestured expressively—"until nightfall? I ask you a simple question, and let you who are gathered here decide: am I to curb my impa-



tience until nightfall? Is my lawful wedded wife to be denied to me till then? If this is not injustice, then, I ask you, what is it?"

It was gross injustice, and in a crescendo of sympathy which drowned out the music we clamoured our support of his protest. Harish, we cried, had been delivered into the hands of the astrologers, and they had thought fit to mock him on his wedding day. It was an infamous betrayal, and one of the guests, more practical than the rest, rose to offer his solution. We would summon a pandit without delay, he roared, ply him with intoxicants, and then bid him examine the constellations once again for a more propitious hour for the marriage. But though we drove around the city in a merry mood, determined to waken some man of God from his slumber, our mission was not successful, and Harish did, after all, have to be married in the morning and curb his impatience till nightfall.

I have never seen Harish display such peacock magnificence as on his wedding day. He was all rose-and-gold splendour. He wore a gold brocade *shervani* that shone in the sun and a rose-tinted *safa* that changed alternately to flame and crimson when he sat down before the fire. I have often thought it a pity that Girish, who so closely resembles his uncle, has completely forsaken Indian clothes for Western attire. The dinner jacket, however superbly tailored, can never compare with the glamour of the Indian dress of ceremonial occasions. Now even this has been reduced to black or white, but in my young days no self-respecting young gentleman would have dreamed of dampening any festive occasion with so sober a garb. To wear a costume of brilliance was to reign for a few hours a prince among men, and Harish was just that on his wedding day.

Any woman would have been hard put to it to compete with him, however gorgeously attired—how much more so an unsophisticated bride of tender years, for Maya had just passed her sixteenth birthday. This, I think, was Maya's mis-

fortune from that day forward. Harish's very presence was flamboyant, while hers was subdued. She had the cool purity of the eucalyptus, as compared with his extravagant *gul-mohur*. She was the mirror-smooth lake to his rushing waterfall.

There need never have been any conflict between them, since opposites, they say, fare well in marriage. Actually, I do not believe there was any conflict. They simply seemed to start their new life far distant from each other. A clash of will might have brought them closer, kindled passion, if not love, and through the years evolved some semblance of a workable relationship. But this was not to be. Their marriage was a sterile, if exotic, bloom, having all the enviable façade—the looks, the money, the position that are deemed important by the world—but not the fragrance or the productivity inherent in a living, breathing plant.

I do not know what was responsible for this. At first I thought it was Maya's loneliness, as is often the case when a young girl first comes to her husband's house. She had, I knew, grown up among brothers and sisters, and had lived in a house bursting with old and young relations. Married life had deprived her of the joyous atmosphere of that full, bustling home without providing her with the warmth she sought. Eventually, I suppose, she ceased to expect it—believed, even, that she did not want it. Sometimes I saw her eyes light up at Veena's pranks or Sanad's questioning curiosity, but the light would flicker out again. She had, by that time, gone too long without the gentler aids to happy living.

When Harish was posted to Lucknow, he and Maya never celebrated the festivals at their own house. I once asked Maya why she did not observe Divali at home, and she turned on me her steady, level gaze, so uncommon in Indian women. I had never known Maya to drop her eyes, except on her wedding day.

"I *have* told the servants to illuminate the house at twilight," she replied in her low-toned voice. She herself spent

the entire day at her brother-in-law's, helping Lakshmi with the preparations for the evening.

"I don't mean only the *diyas*." I felt I was blundering, but it was seldom that she spoke to me, and I had always resented this one barrier between myself and the Shivpal family.

"You mean the prayers," she said. "But Harish does not pray, and I cannot pray in an empty house."

She explained then that Divali had to be celebrated in a house where there were children, where there were elders, a house well balanced by youth and age, where riotous spirits were tempered by wisdom and prayer.

"So, isn't it better not to celebrate it here?" she finished.

I did not know what to say and wished I had said nothing to begin with.

There are people who discuss the problems of their marriage with their friends. Perhaps Harish did so with someone closer to him than myself. Maya, I am certain, remained silent. At any rate, it was tragic that two young people who should have been ideally suited were, in fact, as remote from each other as strangers.

Lakshmi's question about Maya's decision brought me back to the present.

"Well," she repeated, "what's to be done about it?"

I could not help smiling at Lakshmi's troubled expression. People whose daily lives have the quality of smooth-functioning machinery are more put out by the slightest breakdown in its working than those who rely on less perfect mechanisms. A major crisis did not worry me nearly so much as a minor mishap dismayed the Shivpals. I was reminded of Govind Narayan's acute distress one day over the fact that some mistake had been made by his tobacco merchants in the blend they had prepared for him. The mixture had contained one particle more of a particular ingredient than he fancied, and it had reduced the time set aside for his afternoon smoke to a period of fretful worry. Though the tobacco had been returned immediately by messenger and the mistake

rectified within the hour, it had taken much longer than this for his equilibrium to be restored. "I cannot understand how they could have made such a mistake," he had kept repeating, in pained perplexity. "I have been dealing with these very merchants for eighteen years, and my father before me."

"Don't look so worried," I now begged Lakshmi. "I assure you no harm can come to Maya. An interest of this sort may be just what she needs. It's not political work. The Congress aroused interest in the villages, to begin with, and the major part of the work is being done by Congress volunteers, but there are others interested in it."

I named a reputable, socially prominent family whose daughter had expressed an interest in our scheme.

"As for her wearing *pyjama-kurta*," I said, "I don't know where Harish heard about that. There may be one or two instances of it among the women, but I have not actually seen any myself."

Lakshmi gave a sigh of relief. "Why is it so satisfying to talk to you?" she said. "You seem to solve problems so easily. Here was I upset about all this, and you have come along and made it sound so simple and natural."

I felt pleased with myself. A compliment is nice at any time, and coming from an attractive woman it is especially pleasant.

"There is a grand line in the Bhagavad-Gita," I told her. "It says man should endeavour to become like the ocean into which all rivers flow, calm in the face of their turbulence. Do you recall it?"

She smiled, and asked me if that was what I was attempting to be. "Is the human counterpart of the ocean as limitless in capacity as Nature's ocean?" she asked shrewdly. "Or will it, like the river, feel the need one day to overflow its boundaries toward a larger reservoir?"

"Oh, just as limitless," I assured her glibly. But for the first time in my life I began to wonder what would happen if the need she mentioned ever arose. I had too long been a

listener, too long a repository of other people's confidences to be able to unburden myself of my own feelings with ease. But long-unspoken feelings do not evaporate, and I wondered what I would do if ever they did demand expression.

After my talk with Lakshmi the family withdrew its opposition to Maya's proposal, and Harish overcame his embarrassment by talking of it casually at the Club bar much as he might have done if she had taken up some fashionable charity sponsored by the Governor's lady herself.

"My wife's village, you know," he explained the project to his English friends, implying that Maya's family had owned the land for generations and that she visited it as her rightful heritage. "She's done absolute wonders for it."

Later that year the Government of India allotted a crore of rupees toward the development of rural areas, and Harish, like other local officials, received a circular explaining the purpose of this allotment. Rather than allow Gandhi's revival of village industries to bring about another mass movement, the Government had decided to patronize cottage industry itself. Though this was a temporary measure, it did for the time being make the villages a thoroughly respectable pastime, though the rigours of the work still kept people away.

Altogether it was not so alarming a development as it might have been, and Harish no longer minded it. But he did make the resigned comment that though he did not care what Maya did with her spare time, he did mind the sort of people she would be mixing with. "The oddest types of people go in for this sort of work."

"Most people are odd in one way or another," I remarked.

Harish brushed this aside impatiently. "You know perfectly well what I mean. Meeting odd people of your own class and station in life is quite a different matter from meeting those outside it. You may not like them, but at least you know where you are with them."

Poor Harish little realized that many of those "odd,"

*khadi*-clad, non-Club-going "types" would become ministers of the Government not many years afterward, and that he, a Civil Servant, would be serving under them.

"Oh, well," he consoled himself, "it's not as though she will be meeting them socially."

Harish was not a snob. He could be friendly and informal with people not of his social level. After all, hadn't he mingled with all sorts in the districts? But he maintained that one was more comfortable among people of one's own class.

Lakshmi, seeing that Maya's interest did not entail any adverse publicity for the family and that, on the other hand, it made Maya look much happier, thought it was a good thing after all. At least, she amended, not a bad thing, though it would still have been better if Maya had interested herself in a music circle or a literary society in town.

## CHAPTER V

☛ I WENT with Govind Narayan to see his family off at the station, and in the flurry of their departure was reminded once again of the days of my childhood, when my family had joined the annual exodus to the hills. For weeks in advance our house had been a confusion of packing. Quilts had been taken out and shaken free of the crackling neem leaves in which they had been stored, and crates of kitchen utensils and supplies had been packed, in addition to a trunkful of household linen. We stayed at a hotel, Jenkins's, the same one patronized by the Shivpals, but my aunt, Rohan, took every conceivable thing we might need. She also took two servants, a bearer and an ayah, to look after us children. A hotel, however luxurious, was to her an exile from home, and she was determined to surround herself with as many of her own belongings as she could. My mother would never go because she did not like to leave my father, so I was sent with Rohan Masi and my cousins.

Father came to see us off at the station. Like most efficient people used to organizing the lives of others, he did not believe any major decision or activity could take place without his help. Though my aunt was careful to the point of arriving at the station an hour before the train's scheduled departure and sending the servants with the luggage even earlier, Father insisted on coming with us to see that we got on the train in good time and were made comfortable for the journey.

We travelled in style. Our compartment was swept clean before we entered it. Father had a small tub of ice placed on the floor filled with a variety of aerated drinks, as it was not safe to drink water along the way, and the guard was tipped to take care of us. Needless to say, Rohan Masi's caution ex-

ceeded even Father's. As soon as the train left the station, all the windows were shuttered and secured from within, the door was double-locked, and all night we hovered in a state of semi-consciousness for want of air. There was no persuading my aunt to open even a crack. Any step away from home was, to her, a step toward the unknown, and was therefore fraught with danger. As she lay bunched upon her berth with her quilt drawn over her head, no power on earth could have induced her to admit fresh air into the compartment as the train sped northward through the dense blackness.

On one trip the conductor, after pounding steadily on the door several times and receiving no answer, threatened to summon the police and have the door forced open. This episode did not change my aunt's mode of travel in the least. She emerged from her quilt on that occasion, dishevelled but dignified, and informed the conductor that she, a woman travelling alone with young children, and entrusted with the responsibility of a child not her own, was in no circumstances going to open the door or any of the windows for any reason whatever, and that if her ticket was not collected along the way, it was a pity, but there it was.

She sometimes told us of a long journey she and her mother-in-law had once made in her youth along a hill road by *tonga*. In those days there had been no motor road to the hills, and the journey had had to be made in slow stages, the *tonga* being changed frequently on the way. She recalled her mother-in-law's extreme caution in hiring a new vehicle at each stop. "See that you bring a driver with an honest face," she would warn her servant. "See that he is not one-eyed or his eyes too close together in his head," because these characteristics, as far as she was concerned, were clear indications of a scoundrelly nature. Finally she would admonish him: "Remember we have with us a young girl and a trunk of valuables." With the constant repetition of this injunction, it has never ceased to amaze me that they reached their journey's end with their valuables and their virtue still intact.



At any rate, our own airless journey made the delight of our first few moments of arrival even keener. Lakshmi once told me there was a special smell about the hills, and that if someone had transported her blindfolded to a hill station, her nostrils would have told her where she was. I understand well what she meant by this. The sense of smell can evoke a scene as vividly and nostalgically as the keenest memory. Sometimes a remembered scent has infinitely greater power to stir a half-forgotten impression than a more concrete reminder. The band of coolies who ran pell-mell toward new arrivals at the bus stop with offers of rickshaws to transport them up to the town were not in themselves so forcible a sign of the hills as the acrid odour of cheap, strong tobacco which clung to their clothing and blended with the peculiar, not unpleasant mustiness they exuded.

It was invariably brilliant weather when we arrived. The hillsides, looming green and brown against the sky, were encrusted with newly painted red-roofed houses, old crumbling houses with saffron walls, and gleaming whitewashed ones. Unpainted roofs of corrugated iron glittered in the sunlight. The dizzy effects of the winding road we had travelled vanished into the cool, bright air as we piled into rickshaws for the uphill journey to the hotel.

Past the Indian bazaars we went, where fiery hot *gram* sprinkled with chili powder was sold by singing vendors in narrow cones made of old newspapers, through the European shopping district, and up to Jenkins's Hotel. It was brimming with life at the height of the season. One show-window at the entrance always displayed an elaborate wedding cake or some other artistic confection, and beribboned boxes of Swiss chocolates and loaves of German bread, while the other had an array of dolls and toys that were available at the hotel's toy shop next door.

How little things changed during all the years of my childhood and right up to the time when the Shivpal children were grown up! In the hills the English "gloss" was more evi-

dent than in the plains, because the hill stations had been created by the English. How incongruous, I have often thought, the first milliner's establishment, the first bakery must have looked, set in the primitive ancience of the Himalayan foothills, in the sight of hill folk who had never seen anything like them. However, that was long ago, and in my time the surface "gloss" had hardened, brightened, and become permanent. People of my sort hardly noticed that there was anything to a hill station besides the dances and the parties, the shops, the skating-rink, and the cinemas. The men to whom the hilly country belonged, those who lived there the year round and eked out a difficult living from the stony soil, were to us just porters to carry our luggage and coolies to transport us from place to place. I blush to think how Rohan Masi, and many like her, I am sure, haggled mercilessly with two perspiring and undersized porters who had carried an unimaginable amount of heavy luggage over a steep road. How closely we clung to the chains that bound us—the wealthy to their wealth, the religious to their religion, the women to their seclusion—and all in the name of wisdom and godliness!

I stopped going to the hills soon after I left school, but Rohan Masi still went every summer, now taking her three daughters-in-law with her, and we saw her on the train as it steamed in from Sharanpur. In a little while Lakshmi and the children had been settled in their compartment and their luggage placed under the berths. The servants' tickets had been bought. Mirza, the bearer, had refreshed himself at the stall marked *Muslim Water* and Lakshmi's maid at another stall marked *Hindu Tea*, while Rosie, Veena's ayah, stood haughtily aloof waiting to board the train. Govind Narayan and I went to Rohan Masi's compartment to greet her.

"Well, Rohan Masi," Govind Narayan said, "you are wise to be escaping the heat."

"I can hardly send the girls alone," she said, referring to

her daughters-in-law, three strapping young women, all of whom had children of their own and seemed capable of looking after themselves.

"That is only proper." Govind Narayan smiled. "I myself don't hold with young women travelling alone."

Rohan Masi gave a snort.

"But haven't you an ayah with you?" I asked.

"The girls are quite able to look after their children. They will have nothing else to do in Mussoorie," she said. "What is the point of wasting money taking ayahs? They only quarrel among themselves."

With Rohan Masi, money was either saved or wasted. To spend money with the purpose of achieving comfort or pleasure was incomprehensible to her. The bank was the place for money, and peace of mind was the result of knowing there was plenty of it in the bank. Though extremely well off herself, she had never employed a personal maid. She had no use for the feminine vanities a maid would cater to. Her one luxury, if he could be called this, was her servant, Ramdin, an ill-starred individual whose sole purpose in life, it appeared, was to carry her silver *pān-dān* wherever she went. It was his job to replenish it regularly with fresh *pān* leaves wrapped in a damp cloth, finely chopped areka nut, cardamoms, and tobacco. He was invariably summoned by the irate cry of "*Arē kambakht!* Hast thou died in thy sleep?" As a youngster I thought his name was *Arē kambakht*.

It was a mystery why he remained with the exacting Rohan Masi. Govind Narayan offered the explanation that he had for so many years tended the *pān-dān* that possibly his physical and mental capacities could no longer adjust themselves to another task. At any rate, having attended to his duty, he would doze in an uncomfortable squatting position, never lying down, his arms supported on his bony knees extending stiffly before him, his head drooping, till suddenly the familiar invocation would pierce the air, galvanizing him into action. He sat on the platform now, not minding the rattling

barrows of luggage and all the shrill station noises round him, till Rohan Masi's voice jarred him awake.

"*Arē kambakht!*" she shouted. "Rouse thyself from thy unholy slumber lest thou never wake at all!"

Jerked back to reality, Ramdin took hold of the *pān-dān* beside him and stumbled to his feet. Rohan took a *pān* out of its damp folds and stored it carefully in one check. She saw Veena standing on the platform holding her ayah's hand.

"It may be the light," she told Govind Narayan, scrutinizing her carefully, "but that girl of yours is distinctly darker than when I last saw her." She looked again. "Distinctly," she pronounced. "What class is Sanad in now?" she asked, catching sight of him.

"The third," said Govind Narayan.

"The third?" She frowned. "The boy needs private tuition. I'd waste no time if I were you, Govind Narayan. Get him coached after school. You want him to be decently placed in life, don't you? How is Girish doing?" she went on.

"Oh, very well—"

"Is that him there? He has grown. The best-looking of the three," she stated, "but much too thin. I suppose you want him to join the Civil Service."

"Well, it is too early yet—"

"He will do well in the Service. I don't see Maya."

"She's not going," replied Govind Narayan.

"Not going?" Rohan Masi's surprise was muffled by the wad of *pān* in her cheek. "And do you call yourself the head of your family, allowing that foolish girl to remain in the heat?"

Govind Narayan meekly acknowledged the reproof.

"Of course she must go. You must speak to her."

Govind Narayan inclined his head obediently.

"What will women think of next?" she exclaimed, addressing the wheelbarrows rumbling past. "What is she going to do with herself?"

Govind Narayan and I exchanged a surreptitious glance,

but Rohan Masi intercepted it, and then nothing would do but that she must hear the whole story.

She pinned me with a severe glare. "Are you responsible for this?" She did not wait for an answer. "Had you married at the proper time, you would by now have several children and would be far too busy earning their keep to put strange ideas into other people's heads."

It was a sore point with Rohan Masi that, while I did not earn a decent living as every man should, I continued to accept the allowance my father insisted on making me. Another thing she held against me was my refusal to get married. She had long served her community in arranging marriages among its sons and daughters. This suited her, for she had always been autocratically inclined. Her less charitable contemporaries maintained she would have been superb as commander of a battalion. Everyday life did not give her nearly enough scope for the exercise of her military talents and tendencies. Still, no one could complain that she did not utilize these to the fullest in the setting allotted to her, and she was at her best while arranging matches. Having done splendidly for her own children, she had never forgiven me for continuing to evade her.

Rohan Masi's own offspring had none of them been ambitious in this field, and had been content to let her decide for them. She was pleased with her daughters-in-law and the husbands she had found for her girls. The world, in her opinion, would remain what it was despite the brilliantly successful and the ardent reformers among men. There was no need to try to turn it upside down with needless ambition. It was just a waste of energy that could much better be utilized in doing what the stars intended: marrying, raising a family, and living a routine life until old age and a life of meditation beckoned. Rohan's own routine life consisted of ruling her household with an iron hand and carrying the keys. In due course she would delegate this arduous and important function to her eldest daughter-in-law, Sheela, but while she her-

self was hale and hearty she saw no reason to shift her responsibilities on to younger shoulders whose authority no servant would respect in any case. The young needed control and guidance. Fortunately, God had given Rohan sufficient health and vitality to fulfil this task.

The signal for the train's departure was lowered, we said our good-byes, and Rohan busied herself shuttering her compartment. I felt sorry for the young women inside.

The Shivpal children's lives in Mussoorie followed more or less the same pattern that my own had. Like me, they rode and roller-skated and went for walks. In the evenings they visited the bandstand, where a band dressed in pillar-box red played its conventional repertoire: "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," "Tipperary," and "Loch Lomond." In the square overlooking a wide arc of mountains, they mixed with other children and promenaders, bought balloons, and ate pop-cicles. So the unvarying repetition had gone on in my own time and all through the years. The only noteworthy changes I remember as a child were in the fashions of dress among the European ladies who strolled along the Mall in the evenings and filled the ballrooms of the smart hotels on gala nights, their white shoulders and bosoms gleaming above their ball-gowns.

Rohan Masi would never go down to the dining-room on a gala night, refusing, as she put it, to be a witness to public nudity. When we reminded her that most people went nearly naked in India, she said that was quite another matter. They could not afford to dress, and, besides, they did not deliberately expose vast expanses of white flesh that looked far more naked than Indian skin. As far as she was concerned it was not indecent to bare any part of the body except the bosom, and to bare this portion of the anatomy to the slightest extent, even to suggest by the arrangement of one's clothing that it existed, was scandalous. The sari, she maintained, was specifically designed to conceal any suggestion of the bosom.

Govind Narayan and I waited till the train had rattled out of the station and then went to dine at his house.

Lakshmi, that year, had a mildly unsavoury experience at Jenkins's Hotel. At the hotel's annual fancy-dress party for children, Veena was awarded the second instead of the first prize on grounds of her being an Indian child. The unsavouriness came in because Veena had actually been given the first prize when a protest was raised by a group of the women present and the judges were obliged to change their decision. A little English girl in a crinoline, bonnet, and pantaloons came forward to receive Veena's prize, and Veena was given hers. Only Lakshmi's smooth handling of the situation prevented a howl of protest from the spirited child at having to surrender a lordly bear and accept a box of chocolates instead.

Lakshmi, like her husband, has a talent for dismissing any unpleasant event from her thoughts. It is what has enabled her to go through life with a genuine fondness and sympathy for her fellow men, and without ever harbouring a grudge. It is responsible, too, for the fact that even now, when she is nearly fifty, her face does not reflect the traces of harassment that accumulated discontent and frustration bring to the most perfect features. She is still, and always will be, a supremely dignified woman, incapable of being petty.

Govind Narayan received news of the episode in a letter from her, and he read me part of it when I dropped in to see him one evening. Lakshmi was a regular client of the hotel's, and, not wanting to lose her, Mrs. Jenkins had gone up to her suite the next day to placate her. I could imagine the proprietress, buxom and brass-haired, with the solid, upholstered look that many years of good eating had given her, going to Lakshmi's rooms prepared for injured behaviour, and finding instead a gracious and smiling woman. It is disconcerting, having donned the guise of ministering angel, to find that no one is in need of angelic help. It is apt to make one appear foolish and one's kindness unnecessary. But Mrs. Jenkins had

not felt uncomfortable for long. No one did in Lakshmi's presence.

"Please do not upset yourself, Mrs. Jenkins," Lakshmi had said. "I was just going to have a cup of tea. Won't you join me?" and "Oh, do—I insist," when the proprietress had risen flustered, saying she had work to do in the office. So they had spent a pleasant half-hour together.

I confess I did not react so mildly as Govind Narayan when the story was related to me. I was probably in a bad temper about something else and argued with him about the insult to his child.

"In the name of your culture and traditions, if not your own personal pride," I said heatedly, "doesn't it upset you at all?"

Govind Narayan's eyes twinkled. "What are five thousand years of culture if they have not taught one to be polite?"

"Is politeness the only thing in the world that matters?" I asked, irritated.

"That men may live together in civilized accord—it is very nearly the only thing that matters," he replied.



## CHAPTER VI

☞ HOW long ago the time of which I write now seems! All the recent changes make it seem so. It is as if a muffled drum that beat in the distance has come closer and closer until it is no longer muffled, but a clear, definite beat pounding in one's ears, as if all that was prophesied long ago has come to pass. The man who wore *khadi* at that time was a social outcast; now he fills the stage. I think of this as I recall the long, rather dingy room I rented in Lucknow to use as an office for keeping files and accounts connected with the development of the rural areas under my charge.

The room certainly presented a dreary aspect when I first moved into it. Short of funds, I had rented the cheapest accommodation I could find, saving the organization's money for the shop we would eventually open to sell products made in the villages. I had furnished the room with only the necessary minimum of furniture: a set of scarred chairs and desks hired from a workshop where they would have ended their usefulness after long service in a local school, had I not rescued them from the carpenter's saw. The walls were of a harsh chalk blue, faded in patches, and I had hung no curtains. I had thought of asking one of the women in our group to do this for me.

The arrangement of a room requires a woman's talent, but I, even more than most men of my acquaintance, lived oblivious to my surroundings. I had no gift for making them more livable. I think the wilting nasturtiums in the pottery bowl on my desk had been placed there by the *chowkidar* who locked up after me, and, if so, the shiny calendar on one wall picturing a prancing, garish Hanuman must also

have been Bihari's contribution. His tastes seemed to run more to interior decoration than to cleanliness, because a fine film of dust covered the chairs. I summoned him with a shout, and he ran in, obliging as ever, his turban slightly askew. When he relaxed outside, which was most of the time, he took it off, and my summons must have given him no time to set it at the correct angle.

"Bihari," I reprimanded him, "it's true we have no money to waste, but we can quite easily spare what is needed for an extra *jharan* for you. Look, yourself, at the dust in this room."

"Now, is that not remarkable!" Bihari exclaimed. "With my own hands I have polished the surface of each and every chair only this morning."

He produced a rag from the pocket of his *kurta* and proceeded to raise swirls of dust by flicking it across the chairs.

"You will see," he informed me. "It will again be the same in an hour. There has not been enough rain this year, and the dust has not settled."

Bihari was quite obviously in the mood for conversation, but I thought it best to check this tendency and get down to work.

"If I went about my work as carelessly as you go about yours, I hate to think what the result would be. You must develop a sense of responsibility," and I gave him a nod of dismissal.

"In my former post," said Bihari, loitering, "Rowland Sahib commended my sense of responsibility."

"Well, you are obviously not as efficient as you used to be," I said.

He chose to ignore this slur. "In my former post I was given tea and sugar and a uniform. The uniform is now quite shabby and I am compelled to dress like this."

He looked regretfully down at his *dhoti-kurta*, which was not very tactful of him since I was similarly attired. I did not for a moment believe that his former post had been as rewarding as he described it, and there were times when I felt

like wringing the unknown Rowland Sahib's neck, so often were his exemplary sayings and doings placed before me.

"Very well, you shall have tea and sugar. As for the uniform, you and I and all of us who work here must wear *khadi*. Look upon it as your uniform. And there is nothing wrong with *dhoti-kurta*. I wear it too," I added, somewhat unnecessarily.

This clearly did not appeal to Bihari, who thought it a sad and confused world where master and servant must dress alike—and in drab white cloth at that.

"There is good strong Japanese cloth on the market, of many colours, and cheap too," he suggested hopefully.

"Don't you know we must all wear *swadeshi* if India is ever to be free?" I said, at the end of my reasonableness. "Don't you *want* your country to be free?"

"Oh, yes," he replied promptly. "Otherwise your labours here will have been quite useless, will they not?"

I was getting the worst of the discussion and was not sorry when Kunti Behen came in. She was one of the workers in our group, and I thought of Harish's remark regarding "odd types" each time I saw her. How little it would mean nowadays, because Kunti Behen is an active member of the Legislative Assembly and likely, if she continues to show so much promise, to become a member of the cabinet, or so it is rumoured.

Kunti Behen must have been in her late thirties, though how I arrive at that estimate I'm not quite sure. She might have been anywhere between twenty-five and forty-five. She was stockily and sturdily built and showed a scornful unconcern for her appearance by refraining from combing her hair or cleaning her nails. It was apparent that she considered such activities a frivolous waste of time. She had joined the Congress to do a job of work, and nothing would move her from her path. I think she believed that her unkempt appearance identified her with The People. In any case, she had nothing but contempt for women who attended to their

toilette while rural India cried out for assistance. The sari is ordinarily five or six yards long. On her it looked almost drum-tight, so negligently did she arrange it. But she had, as the saying goes, a heart of gold, and she could work harder and accomplish more than several of us put together. It was much easier to agree with her than to argue with her. I had seen village women come, curious and giggling, their bangles jingling, weighty silver jewellery framing their piquant faces and encircling slim ankles, quickly sober to the task of learning how to spin.

"I came to take the measurements for the curtains," she said.

"Please don't trouble," I begged, realizing in dismay that Kunti Behen's taste and mine would not coincide.

"No trouble," she said briskly, and produced a tape-measure from a large shopping-bag she was carrying.

For a moment I had the sinking feeling that she might hoist herself on to one of the desks to measure the windows, and that this procedure would surely reveal much more of Kunti Behen than I was prepared to view. Fortunately, she told Bihari to do the work, and sat down herself. A peculiar odour compounded of jasmine hair oil, perspiration, and onions floated around the room.

"This is not a job for a man," she said. "You have enough work to do without worrying over the curtains."

"It is very kind of you," I replied. "But you must have enough to do yourself. Your home—"

"My husband passed away when we had been married only three years," she offered conversationally. "After that I became an active worker. I had no children. Our marriage was not consummated, you see, since my husband was a close follower of *Mahatma*'s."

I concentrated on the prancing Hanuman on the opposite wall, wondering why I should feel embarrassed. One of my father's clerks had regularly informed us of the waxing and waning of his wife's moon month because on certain days

she could not cook and he had to take a longer lunch period in order to eat at a restaurant instead of bringing his tiffin-carrier with him. I remember, too, a prominent member of Sharanpur's business set informing the startled Governor on one of His Excellency's state visits that his wife was unable to attend the function because she suffered frequent headaches due to her menopause. Our people know no inhibitions where nature's functions are concerned. I should have been used to this. Yet the knowledge of Kunti Bhen's virginal state added itself to the odour of oil and onions, and I began to sweat profusely. I could hardly hide my joy when Maya came in.

She apologized for disturbing me. "I could not reach you at your hotel," she said. "I was passing by and thought I might find you here. Harish wants you to come to dinner at Norton's tomorrow if you are free."

"Won't you be there?"

"Of course."

"Then naturally I'll come."

This sort of banter would have brought a smile to Lakshmi's eyes, but not Maya's. Her eyes were not the warm, bright hazel of Lakshmi's, but deep black, like her eyebrows and her hair, making her face look all the paler in contrast. There was no divining her thoughts from their opaque depths.

I followed her out to her car. She sank back against the green leather upholstery, the usual look of marble indifference on her face. The car window was an inappropriate frame for the chiselled outline of her profile. There was a quality of unmoving and immovable repose about it, the long eye with its clearly traced brow above it, the straight nose, the modelled chin. Her face had the delicate perfection of a pastel. It belonged in the arabesque setting of a Persian miniature, and the hands, tapering and motionless, that lay in her lap should have been curled about a rose. Lakshmi had often tried to make her smile and laugh. Suddenly I wanted to put

my arm about her gently, draw her out of her trance-like pose, see something more in her eyes than that remote, dark gaze. But I did not dare. It was difficult enough to be flippant with her in conversation, even more so to use a casual gesture toward her. There was no prolonging the moment with small talk either, and before I knew it the car had driven away.

I went inside and found Kunti Behen still there, as solid as the earth on which she stood, as inevitable as taxes. From Maya, lovely, faraway illusion, to Kunti Behen, oil-dredged reality. She was busy jotting the measurements in a notebook.

"There are some suitable prints at the Khaddar Bhandar," she informed me, "cheap and durable."

Suitable, cheap, and durable. The words dragged like weights at my imagination. It was at times like this that I longed for all things expensive and impermanent as long as they were beautiful, if only for an hour. I decided to go and have tea with Govind Narayan.

"Thank you, Kunti Behen," I said. "I'm quite sure you will do a much better job of the curtains than I ever could have done."

She looked a little surprised by my fervour, but happily acknowledged the compliment.

On my way to the Shivpals' I stopped at my hotel to collect my mail and found a letter from my mother asking me to return to Sharanpur if I had no important work in Lucknow. She had not been well, she wrote, and wanted to see more of me. I arrived at Govind Narayan's in a troubled frame of mind. He had been going over the land accounts sent by his *munshi*, and was now having his tea in the garden.

"What brings you here at this hour?" he asked.

I told him of my desire to get away from the drabness of the office, and then of my mother's poor health.

"It is nothing serious, I hope," he said anxiously.

"I don't know. Her letter does not say. But I must go. You know I've never been the son she would have liked me to be,

and at a time like this I feel more guilty and neglectful of her than ever."

Govind Narayan knew that my mother would have liked me to marry and give her grandchildren, even if I would not live the settled life other people did. Many times in the past years I had steadily refused to consider the proposals that had come for me to her and my father. It was a disappointment she felt even more keenly since she had been widowed some months earlier.

"It is not natural to go through life alone," she had said time and again. "Wander about if you must, but somewhere in this world there must be a haven awaiting you when you need it. There are things your work can never take the place of, not for all your life."

But I was waiting for a realization of another sort, and I could not accept the routine marriage relationship I saw about me. It had been time to marry long ago, but I had not been able to consent to it.

I sat down on the grass before a chair could be brought, and must have looked dejected, because Govind Narayan, showing his sympathy in a manner typical of him, said. "Let me show you something beautiful I have just come by, my friend."

He clapped his hands and gave instructions to the servant who appeared. Soon the man returned with a black steel box. Govind Narayan took a key from his pocket and, unlocking it, took out a long black casket. Inside, on white velvet, lay a necklace of square-cut Burma rubies in a fragile setting of gold. Lifting it carefully, he showed me the reverse side, all green and rose Jaipur enamel picturing a paradise of exquisitely wrought birds and flowers. I had seen others of this type, but, like everything chosen by Govind Narayan, it had that small but marked difference which lifted it out of the ordinary and made it a uniquely lovely piece.

"For Lakshmi." He smiled. "I had her horoscope read the

other day, and, according to it, she should wear rubies for the next few years. The merchant who brought this had costlier necklaces, but none whose workmanship was so perfect in its detail. I think the reverse side is even finer than the right side. And Lakshmi loves rubies."

The afternoon sun spilled liquid fire on the rubies as I turned them over in my hand. As usual in Govind Narayan's company, I felt all urgency fall away and calm steal through me. In his garden, time had a way of lingering, and nothing was of any significance except the sunlight on the gems I held and the stillness that was studded, gem-like, with a hundred muted sounds. We were no longer individuals, but a part of the subdued brilliance, and the creatures about us seemed to sense this. A squirrel emerging from the foliage near by daintily skirted the grass at my feet. A gauze-winged dragonfly settled lightly on my wrist. We sat for some minutes in quiet accord, I forgetting I still held the necklace, and he leaning back in his chair, oblivious to everything but the glowing day. Then a servant came, soft-footed, across the lawn with a cup for my tea.

I arrived at Harish's party a little late. The other guests had already drunk well, and Harish had a flushed look on his handsome face which could have been the result of either drink or the rigours of playing host to a large party without adequate co-operation from his wife. He looked strained, and his jovial manner was overdone. He turned on me in dismay.

"Oh, my dear chap, really! It's a party, you know."

From Bihari to Harish there was hardly a person I knew who did not at one time or another comment on my attire, and yet there were thousands who went about in it unnoticed. I did look conspicuous among the others, but I was used to this, and it did not disturb me.

"It's so many years since I wore a dinner jacket," I told him, "I'd feel very uncomfortable in one."

He thumped my back, handed me a glass of pineapple



juice, making a wry face, and led me to his guests. I did not know anyone except the Granges.

"You know Tom and Dora," Harish said, and disappeared.

It was a long while since I had seen them, and they had changed. Tom had thickened around the middle, and Dora, never slender, was decidedly large. They, helped along by cocktails, were more talkative than I could be, finding the gap between us almost unbridgeable. Tom was, in fact, very cordial.

"We see a lot of your cousin and his wife in Sharanpur since he took over the mills," he said. "Never got married yourself, did you?"

I said no.

"Don't blame you," he said in mock sympathy, and then added: "Actually, old boy, I've always wondered how you fellows can marry without knowing what the girl's legs look like. You know, all shrouded up all the time. They might be bow-legged or anything."

"As a matter of fact," I remarked, "that's why I've never married."

Tom thought this a huge joke. "You know that reminds me of a story—"

I never did hear his story because I saw Maya emerge through a haze of smoke to ask us to go in to dinner. I kept nodding toward Tom, but I had no idea what he was saying. With a slight shock I felt I was seeing Maya clearly for the first time. She wore a plain sari of some nondescript colour, and her very lack of ornaments and embellishments made me realize that I had never looked at her closely before. She must look like this early in the morning, I thought, dew-fresh and dawn-pale.

Born and brought up at a time and in a country where convention rather than individual taste ruled the fashion, Maya had always worn the rather ornate saris and heavy jewellery appropriate to her social position. Women did so even while they complained they did not like to. I remember my mother

telling me that for the first few months of her marriage she had slept with all her bridal jewellery on—and it was a considerable amount—for fear of her mother-in-law's disapproval had she removed it even at night. A married woman must never be unadorned. I now realized how little this convention had suited Maya.

"A pity she is so tall and thin" had been Ammaji's opinion of her. Beauty in a woman demanded curves. Maya's spare slenderness and fine-boned features bespoke character rather than prettiness, and had been overwhelmed by the gilded setting of her ill-chosen attire. She moved now with a grace and freedom I had not noticed before. And at the same time I saw that Harish, for all his gaiety, must be furious with her for coming to the party dressed in this fashion.

The dining-room was almost empty except for our party. It looked as depressing as all the hotel dining-rooms I have ever seen in India, and I was not surprised that Govind Narayan had turned down Harish's invitation to dine there. The dinner, I was sure, would be no improvement on the atmosphere. I was right. We began with a floury soup called Crème Something, followed by greasy fried fish. The menu informed us that there was chicken to follow, and I feared it would be one that had died a natural death after living to a ripe old age. It was no wonder that so few people in India ate at hotels and restaurants and so many were vegetarians. Eating out was at the best of times an ordeal, certainly in Lucknow, unless one went to an Indian restaurant and ate Indian food, and this Harish would never serve his European guests. That was the reason why he entertained outside instead of in his own home. Maya had no knowledge of European cooking, and the cook she employed could produce only Indian dishes.

There was dancing during dinner. On the dance floor a Daphne or Mavis or Dulcie from the local railway colony giggled drunkenly into her partner's lapel. I sat at the table, toying with my food, watching the dancers and worrying

about my mother. I don't know when I realized that Maya was not in her place. She did not dance, so, like me, she had remained seated, and I had not seen her leave the room. At first I thought she had gone to the powder room, but when she did not return after a little while I wondered what had happened. She had been looking paler than usual, and I thought perhaps she had not felt well and had gone home. Harish, on the dance floor, had either not noticed his wife's absence or had decided to ignore it.

I left the dining-room and walked through the lobby to the entrance. Harish's car was still there, and the chauffeur sprang up from a bench when he saw me, hastily stubbing out his cigarette with his shoe. I waved him back to the bench and retraced my steps through the lobby. A terrace bordered by potted palms and crotons extended along one side of it, and beyond this was the hotel's garden. The terrace was deserted at this time of night, and it struck me that Maya, unwell or upset about something, had decided to get a breath of air. I found her standing near the balustrade, half turned toward the garden. She must have heard me approaching, but did not move. I wished I could retreat to the dining-room, but now that she knew someone had come, it would have seemed rude to go away without saying a word.

"May I stay?"

It was not what I had intended to say at all. I had meant to ask after her health, and after a few moments to take her back to the dining-room before everybody noticed her absence, but something about her face arrested my attention. She looked waxen in the moonlight, and when I spoke she did not start or smile or react in any way. Except that she was standing, she might have been asleep.

"Have you run away too?" she asked, and her voice was low, as though it guarded a secret.

We were bound together by the moonlight in the strange intimacy of two conspirators, she because she was unhappy, and I because of my difference from the others in the dining-

room. Perhaps this was why she did not question my coming after her or show surprise at my desire to stay.

"Maya, what are you running away from?"

Stupid, unthinking question to which there might be a thousand answers, none of which I had any right to know. But she did not answer. She sat down on a stone bench near her, and I thought she had forgotten I was there when at last she said: "What is the most important thing in life?"

It was a little girl's question, innocently asked, and I wanted to smile down at her. What did she want me to say? Love? Happiness? The fulfilment of one's dreams? She did not wait for me to reply.

"A response," she said, and it sounded forlorn. "Not a good one or an approving one, necessarily, just a response of any kind. Even whether we live or die is not important unless it is important to someone."

Her words moved me deeply because she had never spoken like this before, and because I knew she was saying things under the spell of the moon which she would never have said ordinarily. For the first time I saw her as vulnerable, and this time I did what I had longed to do before—comfort her in some way. She was looking like a hurt child, and I laid my hand on her head, much as I would have done to Veena had she come to me for understanding.

If it is true that our life can be transformed in an instant of sudden awareness, making us alive to a truth we have been dead to till then, that instant came when I touched Maya's hair. It was one thing to think of comforting her, and quite another to caress her soft black hair, electric to the touch, to feel one's hand slip down her cheek, fly back again to her hair, and be caught in the bewildering discovery that this hair, this face under one's hand were infinitely dear. I know that I trembled with the discovery as I traced the outlines of her face with my finger, her eyebrows, her lips, her cheek, blindly memorizing every detail of it, until my lips followed the path of my finger and Maya was in my arms. Even if she

had wanted to escape me, she could not have done so. I, who had wanted to give her solace, clung despairing to her instead.

It was she who finally withdrew herself from my imprisoning arms and sat down again, mutely begging me to be wise. So I did not cradle her in my arms or kiss her fingers, one by one, as I longed to do. I sat beside her instead, looking at her as though I would never see her again. I would not, of course—never again like this. And the thought constricted my throat and brought tears to my eyes till I remembered that never again would she be a complete stranger to me either, never again would her face have the expressionless immobility or her beautiful eyes the opaque look they had had before. In the newfound tenderness my despair had given her, it was she who gently reminded me that we must go back to the others. She got up, drew me to my feet, and stood for a moment with her face against my shoulder. And then we made our way back to the dining-room.

We arrived at the table in the middle of a shout of laughter. Evidently someone had just told a funny story. I seated Maya in her chair, and as I was going round to my own, Harish under cover of the laughter muttered: "Thanks, old boy."

I excused myself from the party soon afterward, saying I had to catch an early train to Sharanpur. My single suitcase packed, I left it at my hotel and went down to the river-bank. There I spent what remained of the night, going over and over every minute with Maya, the discovery and the loss of her, the beginning and the end. What should I have done? Begged her to go away with me? Continued to see her and love her, at no matter what cost? Such solutions are for fairy-tales. Reality is framed in another perspective altogether. She with her woman's vision had realized this even before I had, in the move she had made to free herself from my arms, in her mute appeal to me not to touch her. She had realized this and remained calm. I was broken by it, and all night I could not stop my tears. I had lived alone all my adult life

and it had never mattered. Now the knowledge of my empty future overwhelmed me. Half in a stupor I boarded the train to Sharanpur.

I found my mother looking frail. When she held her thin arms up to embrace me, I felt a stab of anxiety for her. I was miserable at the time I had spent away from her without reason. She had been lonely since my father had died, yet not once had she reproached me for being away so much. That evening her bed was placed on the verandah for the night, and she lay upon it while I sat in a chair beside her.

I joked in an effort at light-heartedness. "Well, several hours have passed since my return and you have not once mentioned that I should get married. Have the proposals stopped coming or have you changed your ideas?"

She was looking at the morning-glory creeper on the wall.

"The proposals have not stopped coming," she said, "and I have not changed my ideas. It is your face that has changed."

I sat numb in my chair, not speaking.

"Do you see how beautifully the morning glory is climbing since the new cuttings have been added?" she said. "Promise me you will take care of it for me."

"But you are taking care of it yourself," I protested.

"After I go," she said tranquilly.

I promised.

"And do not marry," she said quietly, still looking away from me. "The second-best will never do. Now go and rest. You are tired."

I got up, and on an impulse of humility bent and lowered my forehead to her feet. There was a world of understanding in her voice as she murmured the benediction: "May you grow in wisdom; may your sorrows flee."

I did see Maya again, over and over again, every time I was in Lucknow, until she and Harish were transferred from

there three years later. I saw her until the searing anguish I felt became a dull anguish, until I could look at her and remain calm. But it was an unnatural calm, and it took its toll. I felt sick in mind and body, and for the first time in my life I went about my work like an automaton, taking no interest in the people I worked with or the programme I had so eagerly begun. I could not come to terms with myself.

## CHAPTER VII

☞ SANAD at eighteen was a vigorous, athletic young man, having none of the rather effeminate good looks characteristic of the young men of his set. He was very much in demand at Government House tennis parties and the other social functions to which young people in Lucknow were invited. Sanad did not have Girish's regular features or languid manner, and I was glad of it, for great beauty of face or form is all too often a barrier between the one so endowed and the world around him. Girish, on the other hand, did not possess Sanad's vitality or restlessness. Since his marriage to Devaki he was already cast in a mould, and would, I was sure, remain in it without any great changes for the rest of his life. His polish and assurance were as marked as Harish's and his opinions as complacent as Govind Narayan's.

Devaki was both decorative and efficient, an altogether suitable wife for a young businessman employed in the Calcutta office of James McDermott Ltd. It was Rohan Masi who, with her unerring instinct for matchmaking, had drawn Lakshmi's attention to the girl one summer in Mussoorie. Devaki's parents had hoped for a son-in-law in the I.C.S., Rohan had informed Lakshmi privately, but Girish's charm and his family's considerable income, backed by Rohan's own determined manoeuvres, had won them over. Girish would have protested had anyone suggested it was an arranged match. He had fallen in love with Devaki, he said; it was a marriage of choice. It was a marriage of choice, all right—Rohan's choice—and she was delighted with the outcome.

Girish's marriage made us all realize we were getting no younger, yet on Lakshmi the years seemed scarcely to show



at all. She was, of course, only forty-two, but did not look even that. Hardly a line marred the youthful face that had never known any anxiety. She had not in her life done a day's work with her hands, and they were still as soft as a child's. Time had made her a little plumper and had greyed the still-long, curling hair, but these touches had only enhanced her gentleness and warmth. Married at eighteen, she had been an exceptionally pretty bride, and her husband then, as now, had delighted in indulging her every whim. A woman with no ambition but to be comfortable, Lakshmi had responded to his devotion by providing him with a smoothly run household where the quarrelling voices of servants or the crying of children had seldom been heard. Her servants and her children adored her. She was a being growing rarer in our time: a woman content to be a woman, glorying in her own femininity. From the first moment Devaki was to her another daughter to be petted and spoiled. Lakshmi's only regret was that Girish and Devaki were going to live in Calcutta and would be able to come home only when he had leave.

They had been married with due ceremony because Govind Narayan would not hear of any abbreviated form, war or no war, modern times or no modern times. There had been the usual bustle and preparation and all the fanfare, and though wartime rationing prevented the feeding of hundreds of guests at a full-scale banquet, the reception given instead was almost as sumptuous. Girish looked very much like his uncle, though dressed in a white *shervani* for the wedding, but Devaki was as different from Maya as any bride could have been. She sat with her head lowered during the ceremony, but only because she had been told to do so. Her vivacity shone in the bright brown eyes that took in all the proceedings from under her lowered lashes, and in the hands that she kept folded with an effort. She thoroughly enjoyed the proceedings and the reception afterward. And why not? I thought. The day of timid and tearful brides had disappeared. It was a good thing too, though it had taken with

it some of the formality that had surrounded the married relationship in our parents' generation. The young nowadays are easily delighted, easily distressed, and while this stream of quicksilver response is enchanting to behold, it does not lay the solid foundations for later years which less spectacular emotions might.

Nearly a year later, in February 1942, Sanad left for Calcutta to join Selkirk and Lowe as a probationer. John Trent, a director of the company whom his father knew, had been in Lucknow for Girish's wedding. Govind Narayan had spoken to him about Sanad at the time, and Trent himself, liking what he had seen of Sanad, had offered him an opening. Sanad had never been studiously inclined; the chance to start work had appealed to him more than staying on at the university, and as a good opportunity had presented itself Govind Narayan had felt it should not be allowed to pass.

This was a busy and active year for me, and as summer approached I did not see much of the Shivpals. Lakshmi and Veena went to Mussoorie as usual, Girish was already posted to Calcutta, and Harish had of course been transferred from Lucknow much earlier. I could have gone to see Govind Narayan much oftener, but I deliberately avoided him. I did not want to hear news of Maya. I flung myself into my work, touring as much as I could, and when in Lucknow spending long hours in my office. In July I got a letter from Sanad, but I did not have the time to reply. By then the tide of revolution was sweeping the country once again on a bigger scale than ever before, and once again it looked as though mass arrests would be made. There was still so much work to be done both in my area and in the office that I wondered whether I could get it done before the police came for me, as I was sure they would. I was right.

The reader will forgive me if here, as in the past, I bring in a little of my own history. It will, I hope, help to point out the contrast between the atmosphere Sanad had left behind in Lucknow and the one he came up against in Calcutta. In

any case, it is difficult to avoid the subject of oneself altogether in any account written in the first person, and especially in this one, as I was so close to the Shivpal family.

The monsoon had come and dwindled away. There was very little rain in our province, and, as Bihari had once pointed out, the dust had not settled. A gust of wind would lift puffs of it off the ground, filling the air with its gritty texture. A gauze film of it powdered the surfaces of berths on trains and seats on buses, and on my travels I frequently reached my destination grey-haired. But, apart from the minor discomfort of an occasionally parched throat, the dust did not worry me unduly. I had become used to it.

I was being followed, I knew, by a member of the C.I.D. Moving about as I did in the villages, it was easy to spot a face and manner that did not belong in rural surroundings, and of course the C.I.D. man was conspicuous by his clothes. I think he realized that I was aware of his presence, because all at once he stopped dodging me. Then, one day, we made each other's acquaintance.

I noticed him at a meeting where I was originally to have spoken to the villagers on the necessity of producing more examples of their native craft, basket-weaving, to send to our shop in Lucknow. But on that particular day, with the city dumb and inactive since the news of Gandhi's arrest, and the future of the Rural Development Shop uncertain, I felt that it would be useless to talk of cottage industries. The villagers' immediate welfare seemed much more important, and I realized, as I had countless times before, how wise the Mahatma was in placing no emphasis on distant goals.

As I looked at the faces upturned toward me, dark brown and creased, immemorably patient, expectant, and polite, the immediate future suddenly mattered more than anything else. I forgot about basket-weaving and told them instead how to keep their village clean. Nothing was significant save that the next virulent epidemic—and there would be one—should rob fewer lives, that the next child born should be

born into cleanliness, not filth. I should have warned them, perhaps, of the brooding temper of the cities and the rebellion that might soon spread to them. But I could not. I told them instead to keep their water supply clean and to guard the land between their huts from contamination. I told them they must evacuate themselves in the fields, not in the vicinity of their huts, and that they must throw mud over their excreta to prevent disease from spreading. They sat there listening, not moving, except for the restless shuffling of a few children and the cry of a babe in its mother's arms. What did my words mean to them? There was no way of fathoming. Their health, their very survival, I pleaded, depended on themselves alone. Knowing how they and their kind had survived through time, I felt humble in their midst even as I spoke. But then it was not advice I was offering, but rather a plea that they should put forward all their energies in their own behalf. For them to emerge strong and self-reliant was the only goal that mattered.

Before I had finished speaking I saw the C.I.D. man cl-bowing his way through the crowd to get to the back of it, preparatory, I supposed, to taking his departure. I found him later, waiting under a tree at the train-stop a mile from the village. He wore a rumpled bush shirt and pants of the same indeterminate grey. Whether this was their original colour or the legacy of miles of dusty travel I could not tell. The pants stopped abruptly above his ankles. He had battered leather sandals on his feet and a collection of pencils with chewed tops in the pocket of his bush shirt.

He entered the same compartment I did, which in itself was not noteworthy because we both had to take what little room was available on that crowded train. Squeezed on a bench between two other men, I must have fallen asleep, but when I woke he was still there, watching me. The compartment was nearly empty, and it was evening. A lukewarm, soot-laden wind blew in through the windows, fanning my perspiration dry. Compared with the pitiless heat of the

morning, it was as refreshing as an ocean breeze. I felt rested after my nap, but my guardian looked acutely uncomfortable. Obviously he had not slept or moved from his cramped position on the bench facing mine.

"Excuse me," he hazarded.

"Ycs?"

"Will you be getting down at the next stop?"

"No, I am going on to Lucknow."

"May I request a favour of you?" he asked. "I have not eaten since morning and I should like to get down at the next halt for refreshment."

"By all means," I said.

"But I cannot unless you remain here," he put in somewhat pathetically.

"I shall stay here," I promised him. "Go and refresh yourself."

At the next station he ate hurriedly, standing on the platform, then held his head under a faucet, slapping the water against his face and drinking large gulps of it. He came back looking less sorry for himself.

"What an unpleasant job you have," I said sympathetically.

"One must eat," he said with a shrug, then added: "You are going to Lucknow? Will you be there long?"

"Quite a long time. I have a lot of work in my office there."

He wagged his head knowingly. "Then they will arrest you."

"But why? I am not a political figure."

"They alone know why," he said. "But, after all, you roam the villages, and you might stir up agitation among the *kisans*."

"But you heard me," I protested. "Did it sound like inflammable talk?"

"Teaching people about independence is inflammable."

"Independence?" I echoed. "I said nothing about that at all. All that is far in the future, beyond your lifetime and

mine. You probably mean self-dependence. I was trying to teach them to be dependent only on themselves, not on outside help, for improving their surroundings."

"Self-dependence, independence, these are confusing words," he said airily. "How will the *kisans*, uneducated as they are, distinguish between the two?"

Privately I thought there was a good deal of difference between asking them to clean their own excreta and inciting them to overthrow a government,) but I said nothing. I was more impatient than ever to get back to Lucknow and attend to my work there before the police came for me.

I was at my desk in my Lucknow office, bone-weary, one August afternoon. The only change that had come over the office since I had rented it was the addition of curtains. The "suitable" material Kunti Behen had so obligingly chosen long ago had turned out to be a violent *khadi* print that was perpetually at war with the chalk-blue walls. I could not dispute the fact of its durability, however, for many washings through the years had not altered its texture or its colour one whit, and it looked destined to outlast us all.

I noticed tiredly that dust still filmed the chairs, and on opening the desk drawer I discovered a batch of letters that Bihari, with his artist's temperament, had omitted to forward to me while I had been absent. On reading them, I found that they were fairly important and should have been attended to weeks earlier, but urgency, of course, was not in Bihari's vocabulary. Listless, hot, and inert as I myself felt, I did not want to take the matter up with him just then, but when he himself strolled in to enquire whether everything was in order, I had to tell him it most certainly was not. His explanation for not having forwarded my mail was simple: how was he to know it was important? Besides, he could not read or write. I pointed out that someone else could have done the writing for him, and he said brightly that that was true and he must remember it another time.

I had seen Bihari at our Literacy Day gatherings every year and had watched him industriously tracing the letters of his name in the dust with a twig, guided by a Congress volunteer. I had thought he was interested enough to follow up these demonstrations by learning more than just the writing of his name.

"Aren't you even curious enough to learn?" I demanded.

He smiled his engaging smile, which had just that hint of patronage in it that made me feel ever so slightly unintelligent. "Curiosity is for the young. With my grey hairs it would not be seemly."

"Is there anything in life for the old?" I asked. I was not the least interested in his views on the subject, but I was determined to find him at a loss just once.

"Naturally," he replied, looking at me to make sure I was not laughing at him. "There are pilgrimages to be made. Look at my old mother, for example. Six years ago she took *bairag*, and now she visits all the places of pilgrimage. It is a great satisfaction to her."

I thought with sudden humility of the picture his words brought before me and forgot to bait him any further. A slight, shaven-headed woman, she must be, seeking God's image in shrines all over India. To look upward at the image, to place before it a copper coin or a sweetmeat or a handful of marigolds was to forget the nightmare of a crowded, airless train or, if she journeyed on foot, the agony of an aching body. How many there must be like her, I thought—not the priests and the pandits, but the lowly and the unlettered, yearning toward God, clinging vine-like to their faith and sustained by it through all their troubles.

"Do you ever go to Vilayat?" Bihari broke into my thoughts.

"I have never been," I said. "But why does Vilayat interest you?"

"Not me. It is my old mother. She would like a holy neck-

lace from there. She is tired of the wooden beads she uses for her prayers. She says holy necklaces are available in Vilayat. The letter-writer in our village has told her so. And I have seen the convent sisters at the school wearing them. When I was working for Rowland Sahib I used to take the missy baba to the school every day and I remember them. Where do theirs come from?"

"There is a place called Rome. And a *guru* lives there. He is the *guru* of the convent sisters. He blesses such necklaces, but he is not of our faith. What would your mother do with a necklace blessed by him?"

Bihari looked at me severely. "In the eyes of God all faiths are one."

"That is true," I admitted, abashed.

"And, besides," he added cheerfully, "my mother loves necklaces."

After he left the room I tried to rouse myself from my inertia, to decide I must hurry, clear up my accounts and finish my correspondence before I, like so many others, was arrested. With difficulty I stirred myself out of the coma imposed by the terrible heat and, wiping my perspiring face, picked up my pen. Then Bihari hurried in. I was about to order him out so that I could start work when he agitatedly informed me that a police sergeant wanted to see me. For the first time his poise was disturbed. This was an eventuality his work with Rowland Sahib had not prepared him for.

The sergeant followed him in, a beefy, heavy-featured man with enormous hands and a quantity of reddish hair on his arms. He made Bihari look like a puppet. He took off his solar topce—I could see the dark stain of perspiration inside it—and informed me that I was under arrest. Taking his handkerchief from his pocket, he mopped his forehead with it, waiting for me to get up, I suppose. I could not move from my chair. It was too hot, and I realized then how exhausted I was. I could feel a trickle of sweat starting under



my arms and behind my knees. It seemed utterly absurd to be arrested at that hour, on top of the searing heat and the weariness I had accumulated through the weeks.

"I'm exhausted," I told the sergeant, not stirring from my chair.

He lowered himself gingerly on to one of the schoolroom chairs facing my desk, his topee on his lap, and grinned. "You're not the only one," he said. "You've had me on the run for the past month. You move very fast."

"I've not been in hiding," I protested.

"It's easier to find the ones who hide," he went on. "This business of going about your work as usual, which means tearing around from place to place, is what gets me." He took out a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled deeply. "Well," he said, "that's more like it. And now we'd better go."

"Shall we have a cold drink first?" I suggested, still too lifeless to move. "I'm parched, and if you've been on the go so much, you must be thirsty too."

"Not a bad idea," he agreed. "I'm choked with dust."

Bihari still stood in a corner of the room, watching us, half curious, half fearful. I asked him to fetch us two bottles of something drinkable from the *pānwalla's* shop next door. It would not be cold, but it would be liquid.

Bihari brightened at this mundane request. "The orange or the pink drink?" he enquired cheerfully. Bihari's world was made of rainbow colours. He had a child's love of colour and a child's irresistible desire for anything bright. "The *pānwalla* also has plain soda and some bottled drinks without the bubbles," he added as an afterthought.

I looked across at the sergeant.

"The pink for me." He grimaced. "With bubbles."

"Two pink ones," I told Bihari, and he went happily for them.

We sat there tilting the cloying lukewarm fizz into our mouths straight from the bottles. The *pānwalla* charged extra for glasses, Bihari had explained. Trained to work for an

organization perennially short of funds, he had not been certain whether I would pay the extra odd anna the use of glasses would have cost. I gave him a long-suffering look when he explained this. I did not have the energy to do more.

The sergeant fanned himself with his topee. "Damned hot in here."

"It's as well I'm used to it," I said, "since there are no fans in jail."

"What gets me is why you people want to go to jail."

"There are different forms of madness," I replied. "This is one of them."

"Eh? What's that?" he said good-naturedly, and then noticed the files on my desk. "Anything political there?"

"If you've been following me for the past month," I answered, smiling, "you should know my work isn't political. These are just accounts."

"Anything that isn't strictly minding your own business is political," he said briefly.

I handed the books to him, and he satisfied himself that they were accounts.

"What will become of our shop?" I asked anxiously.

"What, the Rural Development shop? Nothing. We'll put a V-for-Victory sign on it. In fact, that's already been done. Saw it on my way down, now I come to think of it."

Victory for whom, I wondered. For the shop itself, set up after years of hard work? For the villages it represented and the valiant effort they had put forward to make a success of it? Well, perhaps. In the end it might well be that these would emerge victorious long after wars and their histrionic slogans had been forgotten.

I put the files in the wall cupboard and locked it.

"You've got a warrant, I suppose?"

The sergeant grinned. "My word, you *have* been away from civilization. No warrant is necessary. It's under Defence of India, one forty-four."

"Oh," I said. "*Achchā*, let us go."

On the way out I gave the key of the cupboard to Bahari, asking him to take it to Govind Narayan's house with the message that I had been arrested.

Bihari nodded reassuringly. "And have no fear," he said, "the office will be kept spotless in your absence just as if you were here."

"The office," I retorted, "will be closed. You will lock it and take the key to Shivpal Sahib's house. You yourself may go home if you wish. Shivpal Sahib will pay you your salary every month until I am released. I have already made all the arrangements."

"*Ji-huzoor*." Bihari stood with his palms folded, his face full of doubt and fear at the manner of my exit from the office. I could see that he was nervous about me.

"And do not worry about me," I added gently. "I shall be with my companions."

As we drove away in the sergeant's car, it struck me how very appropriate it should have been that at the moment of my departure to prison for an unknown number of months or years, only Bihari should have been at hand to show his concern. Through the cloud of dust behind us I saw him standing there, palms still folded, as if mesmerized—a small, uncertain figure in *dhoti-kurta* receding rapidly into the distance.

The glare was intolerable, like the sun glinting on a thousand knives. I closed my eyes and leaned back against the faded khaki upholstery, trying to compose myself for the span of prison days ahead. It was just as well, I thought wearily, to be out of it all.

I had been in prison before, but those had been pampered terms compared with this one. During my earlier terms, all three in Sharanpur, my father had obtained special permission to send me baskets of fruit and a limited supply of books and magazines. Mother had been allowed to visit me once a month. This time there were to be no such amenities. The Lucknow jail was new to me, and I felt utterly cut off from all

familiar things. I did not mind, having no desire to be reminded of the world outside. I had a feeling almost of relief when the barred iron gate at the entrance to the building grated shut and I was conducted to my barrack. I had been divested of my wallet and fountain pen. I had brought no other belongings, but was told I could send for my personal effects later. I was in no hurry to send for anything.

There were sixteen of us in that barrack, two other political prisoners or *détenus* as we were called, and thirteen serving criminal sentences. It was some time before I mustered enough interest even to speak to the others. They must have thought me a sullen companion. In the course of time I discovered that five of the men were serving life sentences for murder and the rest had been convicted of lesser crimes. We ate the same coarse jail ration and slept on close rows of cots. We washed and bathed under a faucet in the jail yard and walked about the same yard in the evening before we were locked into our barrack for the night.

For several weeks I went through all the motions of living like an automaton. Only when I saw one of the political prisoners spinning in a corner of the yard while the rest of us sat about idle did I realize that I might be better employed that way. He was a pleasant-faced man, probably in his middle forties. His name was Sohan, and everyone called him Sohan Bhai. He told me he had been granted permission to spin. His tranquil voice lifted me for a moment out of my listless frame of mind and beyond my immediate surroundings. Indeed, I noticed them for the first time: the ground caked with spittle, the foul smell of urine coming from the seldom-cleaned lavatory corner. I decided then to ask permission of the jail authorities to spin. After it was granted, Sohan Bhai and I sat spinning every evening in the yard, watched by the young man Nootan, who was the third political prisoner. I enjoyed the banter between him and Sohan Bhai.

Nootan was a cheerful person not much past twenty, full of irrepressible high spirits and always hugely amused by his

own wit. He gave us to understand he was a "student-leader," and he scornfully dismissed our spinning sessions as a waste of time.

"Spinning is outdated," he pronounced. "This is a machine age."

"Still, a man will always need his hands," Sohan Bhai countered.

"Freedom won't come that way," Nootan said with glee. "Why do you wear your fingers out?"

Sohan Bhai smiled, and I, not feeling communicative, went on spinning.

"You can't fight bombs with thread, not even hand-spun thread." Nootan chuckled, delighted with his humour.

"I don't want to fight anybody or anything," said Sohan Bhai.

"Then you are a coward." Nootan grinned. "Evil must be recognized and destroyed."

"My difficulty is to recognize it," said Sohan Bhai.

"Ho! Now he takes me for a fool," Nootan informed the birds wheeling dizzily in the lead sky above us.

Listening to him, we discovered that he was in jail for what he called "seditious activities." He had been "underground," he explained with relish, and I could see from the stories he told that it had given him great satisfaction to cloak his movements with mystery and become something of a hero to his student following. When he was arrested, the university gave him a hero's send-off. He arrived in jail heavily garlanded, his forehead streaked with *tika*, holding a coconut. He was the first among us to be released, and I was sorry to see him go. His light-hearted comments on life had kept us entertained. I did not think I would ever hear of him again, but I did years later. Everyone did, because Nootan, for a brief while, became something of a national figure.

Even after all those years he must have remained very much the "student-leader" I had known, because he never could settle down to being an ordinary citizen in an inde-

pendent country. Everyday life must have seemed dull compared with the excitement of attending meetings that had been forbidden and making sensational speeches in the name of freedom. Nootan tried to regain the thrills of his student days by becoming a Communist, but even this did not keep him in the limelight for long. The fact that he did become an important member of the Party embittered him. The Government did not arrest him, the newspapers did not feature his utterances, and his audiences dissolved. His brief bid for fame ended in failure. He never forgave independent India for the oblivion to which it consigned him. In the attempt to overcome it, he continued to be a rebel and to go "underground," and during one of his prolonged disappearances everyone, I am sure, forgot all about him. I do not know whether he has emerged from hiding or not, or whether he will ever attain the leadership he craves, but at the time of my writing this I have not heard of him for many months.

The day he left the Lucknow jail with his engaging grin and a wave of the hand, we were conscious, however, that we would have less to laugh about in the months ahead. Nootan left the jail as he had entered it, with a flourish. Though there was no reception committee awaiting him at the gate, and though we made no farewell speeches, he made up for these shortcomings by making a little speech himself, extolling the ideal of service and assuring us he was not giving up the good fight.

"I leave you here, comrades," he finished, "but, behind prison bars or outside them, we are all serving the same cause."

I was not at all sure he and I were serving the same cause, but it was not the moment to argue a finer point. After Nootan had gone, Sohan Bhai and I discussed his remark about service, and in the course of our talks I learned something about Sohan Bhai. I relate it here because his story helped me to regain far more than my normal optimism. It was a

rich harvest I reaped from a chance acquaintance in a prison, and it was to stand me in good stead all my life.

Sohan Bhai told me that his wife and children had been killed in the collapse of his house during the Bihar earthquake of 1934. He had been a rising young lawyer at the time of this calamity. Everything he held dear, he told me in an unchanging voice, had been destroyed in one night of agony and terror. The deprivation had made him conscious of how cruelly uncertain were the things that human beings set store by.

"Is that why you gave up everything and joined the Congress?" I asked.

In those days, as I have explained earlier, the Congress, though a political party, was also a channel of service, and renunciation was its slogan, as *khadi* was its badge.

"I gave up nothing," he reminded me. "It was all taken from me. And I might never have done anything afterward but nurse my sorrow if I had not then met the Mahatma."

Because I had never spoken to the Mahatma myself, I was all the more eager to hear of this encounter. Sohan Bhai had been one of the many, he told me, who had formed a solid human wall on either side of the ruined streets of Patna to watch the Mahatma pass by.

"I had never been in such a crowd before," he said. "Not that kind of stricken crowd of thousands made homeless by the earthquake. They were all heaving forward like a gigantic ocean wave to catch a glimpse of Gandhiji, and I thought any minute I should be crushed to death. Even there, half suffocating though I was, it struck me what a twist of fortune had led me, a respected citizen, to be standing there like any common beggar.

"A lot of people were going to see Gandhiji to ask his help and advice. I sought him out, too, believing, like them, that he had come there to bring us solace. I was disappointed."

Sohan Bhai smiled as he remembered the shock he had had

when the Mahatma had offered no conventional balm to heal his recent wounds. He had sent him back instead to the agony of the people in the streets.

"People," said Sohan Bhai, "whom I should not even have noticed before. It was not merely that they were not my kind of people and I did not care what happened to them, but that they reminded me of my own loss and made me all the more miserable. But I did go among them, and for a while I joined in the relief services organized for them. I knew that if I did not give the Mahatma's method a trial, he would have no further use for me, and I needed him. In my grief I clung to him as so many others did, looking upon him as a miraculous rescuer."

"And then you saw that his method had value?" I asked.

"Not at first. I was sure all feeling had deserted me forever, that I should never feel either joy or sorrow again, let alone interest myself in the troubles of others. I told the Mahatma this, and he did not believe me.

"If your body suffered an injury, you would tend it, would you not?' he asked me.

"I told him I would.

"If you were hungry, you would satisfy your hunger?"

"Of course I would,' I said. 'That is only human.'

"Then there is feeling within you, after all, and even if you are interested only in yourself, then you are interested in a fragment of humanity and the way is open for you to reach all human creatures,' he said. 'Do not die before your death.'

"A year later I met Gandhiji again," Sohan Bhai went on. "I told him I had put all my belongings into one suitcase and was ready to follow wherever he led. He told me I must go where my work took me. He smiled at my suitcase and asked me whether it was not a much lighter burden than I had carried before.

"You have now come down to my level,' he said. 'You are unencumbered by possessions, and so you can make common



cause with those who, like you and me, have nothing. You will never be alone. We are a vast brotherhood.' "

Sohan Bhai had stipulated only that he did not want to live or work in Bihar, and the Mahatma had smiled.

" 'All Bharat Mata stands begging before you,' he said. 'Whether you serve her in Bihar or elsewhere makes little difference.' "

So Sohan Bhai had made the whole country his home. He had not met the Mahatma again, but the bonds he had forged with Gandhi's naked and hungry brotherhood had become his life's work.

I did not tell Sohan Bhai much about myself. In view of the tragedy that had shadowed his days and the way he had dignified it, there was really nothing to tell. And there was less and less, I discovered, to bemoan. His very presence was healing. I liked the direct, unemotional way he had spoken of his troubles, and the sureness of his swift-moving fingers as he spun out fine strong thread on his spinning-wheel.

"The *charkha* is medicine both for the body and for the mind," he said. "It keeps idle hands busy and calms the mind."

I had found this true in the past. Now it was like a blessing. Lying awake at night—for little sleep was possible with the chorus of mosquitoes thrumming above my face and the head-long fumbling of bats overhead—I felt curiously at peace with myself. There in the humid darkness alive with the rusty cough of a fellow prisoner and his frequent noisy phlegm-clearing, my mind slowly cleared of its pent-up unhappiness.

That interminable procession of wakeful nights when there was nothing to do but go over the past, when only the past had meaning and every word and act of it stood out like bas-relief, was a bitter but necessary remedy. As I had told myself before that I must forget, now I made myself remember. I took Maya's image from the depths where it had lain buried and brought it to life again. It was painful at first, but gradu-

ally the pain disappeared and all the various images of her that I had long suppressed emerged rain-washed and serene. Whatever measure of calm I achieved I owed to my quiet-spoken companion and the balm of the spinning-wheel.

I said earlier that Sanad wrote to me from Calcutta. In jail I worried a great deal because I had not replied to his letter while I had been free to do so. After my arrest I was not permitted to write, and I wondered how he was liking his work and his new life.

It would have been apparent to anybody going from the U.P. to Calcutta for the first time that the contrast between the two was greater than that between a slow-paced, leisurely existence and a whirling cosmopolitan one. Calcutta was more than the second-largest city in the Empire. It had been a historic milestone in the building of the Empire, and evidences of this fact were abundant. It had prestige as both cosmopolitan centre and commercial capital. It was the place where the *koi hai* policies were made and from where the *koi hai* pattern had since the days of the East India Company flung its net across all British India to the smallest and remotest districts. I wondered what Sanad, who had never before left the U.P., would make of it, what he would think of its neon-lit nights, its air-conditioned cinemas, its exclusive clubs. As it happened, what impressed him most was the monuments. Being Sanad, he was struck by the memorials to the *koi hais* themselves before he noticed anything else about the city.

His letter referring to these had amused me: "I would never have believed," he had written, "that there could be so many monuments in one city. There are monuments dedicated to Lords Canning, Mayo, Lansdowne, Auckland, Roberts, Dufferin, Dalhousie, Kitchener, Sir David Ochterlony, and, of course, Queen Victoria. And that's not all. There are public squares named after Dalhousie, Wellington, Wellesley, and

Beason. I am overwhelmed by all these august persons around me and don't know quite where I am or how my humble presence fits into these surroundings! I annoyed Girish by telling him that everything about Calcutta reminds me of that poem of Kipling's we learned in school—the one that begins:

*'Now in Inja's sunny clime  
Where I used to spend my time  
A-servin' of 'Er Majesty the Queen. . . .'*

I wondered whether Sanad would see the other Calcutta, the parallel to its modernity and expensive elegance. Would he come across the ancience of tradition and the pugnacious adherence to it, the old houses where the orthodox families lived which had separate inner courts for the women? Would he ever travel by bus or tram and notice that seats were frequently kept separate for the women so that they need not feel obliged to mingle with male strangers? He did not. I did not hear from him again till I was released, and what I set down here is the account he gave me when I saw him again two years later.

Sanad, I have said, was a little dazed by it all. It was the Calcutta, he told me, of Uncle Harish. Harish had often spoken nostalgically of the holidays he had spent there, and had longed to return there from his rather dreary provincial postings.

"There's no place in India quite like it, not even Bombay," he had said to Govind Narayan. "You can keep your U.P., Govind. Give me Calcutta any day. There's plenty to do in the evenings, a cosmopolitan society, and one feels at the centre of things." The "things" had turned out to be Calcutta's pattern of living, and especially the Sundays with their unfailing routine: golf, beer, a curry lunch, a siesta, the cinema, then a *chota peg* and dinner. "I tell you, Govind, that's the life!"

Govind Narayan had looked mildly surprised. "But surely

you can get all those things here in Lucknow or anywhere else where there is a golf course."

"The bare essentials might be there," agreed Harish. "But the atmosphere would be lacking. You've got to admit it, we haven't learned how to Live. It's only in the big cities like Calcutta or Bombay or possibly Madras that there's any semblance of Life as it's lived in the rest of the world. This narrow provincial rut is hardly Living."

Govind Narayan who considered the U.P. the cultural centre of India, and therefore of the universe, voiced his disagreement emphatically. He had never understood the feverish pursuit of excitement which characterized the modern concept of pleasure. For him there was pleasure in his rose-garden, in living comfortably and eating well, in solid friendships and the unclouded passage of days and nights. Even in Europe he did not frequent the night clubs and other fashionable haunts that paid their price for being fashionable by being full of smoke. He enjoyed an occasional glass of wine with his meals and kept a selection of wines for the benefit of his more discerning guests, but strong drinks, he believed, coarsened the taste buds and ruined the palate. He thought them vulgar and any life dedicated merely to an aimless round of gaiety lacking in breeding and refinement. There were other, more suitable pastimes for gentlemen of leisure.

"Take New Year's Eve, for example," Harish had persisted. "What choice is there but the Club in this place? In Calcutta there'd be at least half a dozen night spots to choose from."

Govind Narayan enjoyed a glass of champagne himself, but paper hats, whistles, and confetti tangled with a herd of noisy people he did not know and whose acquaintance he had no wish to make added nothing to his enjoyment of an evening, and he told Harish so.

Sanad found Calcutta interesting, if strange. It had a large community of Europeans and, at that time, a shifting popu-

lation of Americans. He could not reconcile in this setting the presence of almond-eyed Bengali women whose beauty belonged to a highly stylized school of Indian art. Here, framed in an atmosphere of jazz music and the cocktail bar, they looked out of place. The men were recognizable enough. They recalled Uncle Harish with their frequent hearty display of good-fellowship. They thumped one another on the back, called one another "I say, old chap," and sported the right school tie. It was the women who confronted Sanad with a startling newness. Slender brown fingers gleaming with crimson varnish, toying with long cigarette holders, diaphanous saris that provocatively outlined their bodies, and a husky-voiced allure that took him further from his accustomed surroundings than the mere sight of a glittering city. In Sanad's world the process of Westernization had confined itself to the men.

In a year's time Bengal would be drifting toward the worst famine in its history, but of this, he later told me, the gay social round gave no warning. The war, in fact, made life a trifle gayer than before; the Three Hundred Club catered to more diners and dancers than ever, and food shortages were unheard of. As a charming friend of Girish's and Devaki's put it, "You can get tins and tins of everything." You could: of asparagus, caviar, and foie gras. Only rice was running short.

"Girish and Devaki were wonderful to me," Sanad told me. "They took me to a lot of parties and to the races, and I met all their friends. They live a very full life."

"And did you enjoy it?" I asked.

"Well, I'm not sure whether I enjoyed it or not. I would start the evening prepared to enjoy myself, and then before-dinner drinks would go on being served till ten and sometimes eleven o'clock. I couldn't take it," he admitted. "In those days, you know, I didn't drink or smoke. I wanted to keep myself in trim for my tennis, and I would start feeling terribly hungry and wishing dinner would be announced, and

by the time it was I'd be in no mood to eat it. Once I actually fell asleep at a party and had to be wakened by my hostess. I'm afraid I got on Girish's nerves a bit."

"I'm not surprised," I smiled. "Why did you keep going out with Girish if you didn't like it?"

"He insisted. He refused to leave me behind. He said I must move in the right circles."

That sounded like Girish.

"One evening," Sanad continued, "we had an argument about it. I asked him whether he really enjoyed the life."

Girish had looked at him, surprised. He hadn't given the matter much thought, but naturally he liked it, he decided. Everyone else did, and surely he was no different from other people of his acquaintance.

"But you do the same things all the time, go to the same places, talk about the same things, and about nothing at all most of the time. Don't you get bored?"

"Don't be an ass," his brother had told him. "Everyone does the same things all the time. Anyway, you'd better learn to drink if you don't want to be considered a stick-in-the-mud. Everybody's going to think I've got a freak for a brother."

Sanad had shrugged, and that careless gesture had annoyed Girish more than a reply would have.

"Look here, Sanad, you're just starting out. Some day you may be posted here to Calcutta. It's your firm's head office. You'll be expected to join the right clubs, meet the right people, and do all the normal, conventional things."

"There won't be much choice about the clubs," Sanad had said, determined to be difficult. "The best ones are where Indians aren't allowed."

Girish's patience was at an end. Sanad had been a thorough "wet" at last night's party, and he was showing no signs of repentance.

"I don't wonder," he said tartly. "Have you seen what they do to the clubs they join? At any rate, I can't change the

club laws, and neither can you. The point is, you've got to fit in or you won't be much of a success. Half your success in your job depends on the sort of social contacts you make and that sort of thing."

"That includes your personal responsibility for various of your female acquaintances," ventured Sanad, recalling matter-of-factly that Girish had spent a long time on the balcony the night before with one of his prettier guests. He had noticed Girish's predilection for the balcony at several parties.

"My dear fellow," said Girish, elaborately casual, "grow up and stop being such an old woman."

"I wondered," Sanad told me later, "why success meant doing exactly what everyone else did, even to the last drink before dinner and the balcony with some willing female now and then. I wondered if Girish actually enjoyed himself or whether he was just anxious to do the 'done' thing. Anyway, he was popular. He and Devaki seldom spent an evening at home."

Girish was firmly entrenched in the Calcutta pattern, so that he, like Harish, thought Lucknow a dull place where there was nothing to do in the evenings.

"I think what I couldn't get used to was the incongruity of it all," Sanad explained to me. "What we call Society and model on the West isn't really the same thing as European society at all. In the West it may be just as purposeless a round, when you come to think of it, but it stems from their own culture and isn't an imitation of someone else's. And birth and breeding count for something. Here it's a matter of whether you speak good English and wear a suit."

"Come, now," I said. "What have you got against either of those qualifications?"

"Nothing at all," he replied, "if they are not one's sole claim to distinction—and that, in what we call Society, is just what they are. That's what Girish and I disagreed about. Once we had an argument that started over the subject of drink."

"Dash it all, d'you expect us all to revert to *nimboo-pani* because whisky isn't an Indian drink?" Girish had asked.

"No," Sanad had said. "That isn't what I mean at all. I'm referring to the incongruity of the entire situation, and drink is only a small part of it. If we drank some powerful local brew and drank it in large quantities in some sort of Indian setting, well, it would have more reality."

I had to smile at the picture this conjured up.

"And drinking is the least of it," Sanad had gone on. "Take our clothes, our mannerisms, our speech. Take us. What *are* we? I'm not saying it's not a good thing to borrow from another culture, but to take it over lock, stock, and barrel, and become an imitation of it—it's pathetic. Every time I drive around the city and see another monument dedicated to a British hero, I wonder what I'm doing here, and whether I haven't strayed into the wrong country by mistake."

"My dear fellow, I wish you wouldn't keep harping on the monuments. I don't know what's come over you," Girish said. "Funny this never struck you at home. I don't remember your being critical of our upbringing at home. What did you think it was fitting us for, an *ashrama* on the Ganges?"

"I wasn't critical of it because there was some sense of proportion about it. Mother and Father and all the atmosphere around us helped to balance it."

"I'm afraid I can't agree with you about all this," said Girish. "After all, this is the twentieth century and there has to be some degree of uniformity in the standards of all civilized peoples. As it is, we lack it to an appalling extent. One fellow goes around in a *dhoti*, another in *pyjama-kurta*, a third in a loincloth. What sort of appearance do we present to the rest of the world?"

"And a fourth fellow goes around in a suit and tie," added Sanad. "Doesn't it occur to you we are adding to the confusion ourselves? Don't you see it's not uniformity I'm objecting to, but a mimic uniformity that has nothing whatever to do with our own roots?"



Girish raised his eyebrows at this outburst on the part of "young Sanad." "The very fact," he said, "that Father saw fit to bring us up in this way should prove he set some store by it and the sort of world our education would give us entry to."

"Oh, I'm sure he sets store by it, but I think he's wrong. Living as he does, rarely moving out of Lucknow, I don't think he has any idea what sort of world it is. I don't think he himself would be happy in it for a minute."

"That's a different matter," said Girish. "He belongs to an older generation. It's we who shall have to fit into it, not people of his age."

Sanad looked doubtful.

"Don't be tiresome, Sanad," Girish said impatiently, "and stop cooking up problems in that fertile brain of yours. Why can't you enjoy life without asking so many questions?"

"Do you know Ronu and Lalita Chatterji?" Sanad asked me.

I had heard of them. Who hadn't? Ronu, now Sir Ronu, headed one of the biggest collieries in the country, and had recently been knighted for his services to the Empire. His wife had had no little share in his rise in the commercial and social worlds. She was also a leading light in her own capacity. I had heard that she had worked closely with the Bengal Governor's lady in organizing a number of drives for the war fund. Besides these, she had sponsored charities in aid of the starving children of Belgium, the war widows of the Netherlands, and many another worthy cause.

"I've met Ronu once," I told Sanad, "and I must have seen Lalita's picture dozens of times in various magazines. Did you meet them in Calcutta?"

"Often. Our lives revolved around them, more or less. It seemed everyone had to be doing what the Chatterjis were doing. They led the throng. If Lalita decided to spend the evening at Prince's, everybody who was anybody decided to

stay there too. If she wanted to leave at midnight and go on to the Three Hundred, then the whole crowd followed her there."

"She's very beautiful," I said.

"She's more than that. There's something about her. Whatever it was, it certainly got Girish. He was in her steady entourage and for a time, at least, one of her favourites. She called him her little mongoose."

"Girish submitting to a nickname like that? Impossible!"

"He would have submitted to far worse than that. I tell you, there was something about her."

"Did you think so too?"

"I couldn't take my eyes off her the first time I saw her. She was presenting a cup at the races. I've seen as many pretty girls as the next person, but you know our standards of prettiness at home are quite different. Any girl with a fair complexion is considered a beauty. Lalita wasn't light-skinned, and she certainly wasn't a girl. She must have been forty or so at the time. I'm no judge of age, and she certainly didn't look forty, but everyone said she was about ten years younger than Ronu. And it wasn't what she wore that impressed one either. That day she was wearing one of those faded-looking French chiffons that were so fashionable then. Still, everything about her appearance was so vivid and twice as alive as anyone else. One simply didn't notice anyone else when she was there."

"It's what is known as sex appeal," I offered, trying to be helpful.

"Oh, it was much more than that," he said. "She was a fascinating person to talk to, I discovered later, and awfully well read. One might have known her for a hundred years and never have got tired of her. I suppose I might never have myself except for one incident.

"We were at a party at her house one night," he continued. "The Chatterjis have a palatial home. Even our biggest and most distinguished houses in the U.P. look a bit crumbly next

to some of the mansions I've seen in Calcutta. Theirs was considered one of the loveliest. Girish was forever pointing out to me the Italian upholstery in the drawing-room and the Venetian glass in the dining-room. They went abroad for all their shopping. In the downstairs salon there were enormous pictures of the Viceroy and Vicereine in silver frames, and a portrait of Lalita done by a French artist not long before. It was rather an unconventional portrait to have in a formal room. It showed her with her hair loose and not flowing down her back as it ordinarily would, but lifted outward to the sides, and with strands of it drifting across her forehead as though there were a mysterious gale blowing around her—mysterious because only her hair was disturbed. She had a lovely figure, and the artist had made the most of it.

"Ronu saw me standing under it and staring, and he came up to me. 'What do you think of it?' he asked.

"I had no notion of its artistic merits, and it didn't seem at all appropriate for that room, but, having made enough *faux pas* during my stay in Calcutta, I decided to be tactful and said I thought it very good.

"He didn't pay much attention to my opinion. He said: 'Every woman has tremendous potentialities for good and evil.'

" 'Don't all human beings?' I asked.

" 'Yes. But women, since they are made almost completely of feelings, have more. As the old nursery rhyme goes: When she was good, she was very, very good, and when she was bad, she was horrid. This picture shows the wicked side of Lalita to perfection. I always tell her that merely to look as she does here would have been sufficient evidence in the Middle Ages to condemn her to the stake for witchcraft.'

"I looked at the picture again and noticed that the artist had elongated her eyes and slanted them upward at the corners. And the mouth, which would have looked more natural in repose, was smiling a strange smile. It came as a shock, but it held one's attention. Although the picture didn't resemble

Lalita strictly—and I'm told good art needn't—it had caught her personality to perfection. She was a person one was irresistibly drawn to, and the picture had captured all that inexplicable fascination."

"It wasn't the picture, surely, that put you off?" I asked Sanad.

"No. It was that entire evening. Everyone was dancing. The main carpet had been rolled up, and the party was very gay. Calcutta was full of American soldiers at the time, and there were always several at Lalita's parties.

"I amused myself by watching the reflection of the chandeliers twinkle in the window-panes. There were long windows opening on to the street. Only the one near me was shut, and all the lights in the room were reflected in it. I saw a little girl outside, begging, I suppose, with an even smaller child on her hip, looking up at the lights. If she was asking for alms, I couldn't hear her because the music was so loud. But I noticed that the child she carried was emaciated beyond belief, his small limbs were rigid, and his head lolled toward her shoulder. Seeing me looking out, she raised his filthy shirt, the only garment he had on, and showed me his jutting ribs. There was the barest covering of flesh on them, and the sight made me want to be sick. Then one of the Chatterjis' liveried *chaprassis* hurried out of the house to drive the girl away. I left the salon and ran to the entrance, hoping to stop him, but the child had already gone.

" 'Why did you drive her away? I would have given her something to eat,' I said angrily. 'The boy she was carrying looked near to starvation.'

"The *chaprassi* looked at me in surprise. 'The food would have done him no good, sahib. He was dead.'

" 'How do you know?' I demanded.

" 'He has been dead for hours,' he said matter-of-factly. 'The girl was here this morning, and he was dead then.'

"I had an insane desire to rush into the salon, stop the music, and shout 'Silence!' Since I couldn't, I stood there

with the *chaprassi*, making him talk to me and delay my return. 'Why does she carry his corpse about with her?' I asked.

" 'To elicit pity, sahib, why else?' he replied. 'And well she might while she can.'

" 'What do you mean?' I asked.

" 'There is not enough human pity for all the corpses we soon shall see,' he prophesied. 'Already the people are straggling in from the villages. The smell of death is about them.'

"I stood at the entrance, not wanting to go back to the salon. In front of me the marble staircase in the hall curved to the upper floor. I wandered upstairs, looking about the house, one of the show-places of Calcutta, and trying to get the little girl with the dead child out of my mind. I'd never been upstairs before, and I peered into every room quite unashamedly. I pushed open a door and stopped in my tracks."

"Lalita was there, I suppose?" I asked Sanad.

"It was her room, and it was full of mirrors. One entire wall was mirror-lined, and I saw several Lalitas standing there, half dressed. Her sari lay trailed right across her bed and half across the floor, as if it had been dragged off her none too gently. She stood in front of her dressing-table, smiling at herself, brushing her long hair, and with every stroke of the brush strands of hair flew up and sparks crackled against the brush. She looked exactly like her portrait, strange and exquisite and, as her husband had said, slightly evil.

"It was seconds before I noticed that someone else was there, a khaki-clad figure huddled at her feet, his face pressed against her knees, his arms clutching her legs convulsively. I suppose I hadn't noticed him earlier because she had looked so completely alone. The fact that this man held her in such desperation as if he would never let her go, and that she stood above him smiling and unconcerned, horrified me. There was something uncanny about her unconcern. As soon as I saw him I wanted to leave, but she had seen me and I couldn't move.

"She went on brushing her hair.

"Does the party bore you?" she said lazily.

"The man at her feet sprang up. He was in uniform and his face was swollen and blotched with tears. He looked about my age. He didn't say one word to her, and, pushing past me, he rushed downstairs.

"An American," she said, "and so terribly homesick. Why are Americans always so homesick?"

"I turned to go.

"My sari," she said. "Hand it to me, would you?"

"I looked at the yards and yards of material trailing across her bed and the floor, and I'm darned if I knew what to do with it. God knows which end of it she wanted or how I was supposed to hand it to her. I'd only seen saris on women before. I decided to pick up the middle of it. It was the stupidest thing I could have done. There were yards hanging on either side of me. I let go of the middle and tried to get hold of one end, and by this time that wretched sari looked like a bundle of some sort. And then she started laughing at me. I felt like strangling her with the stuff. She laughed at me from every mirror in the room, and she didn't seem to care that she was half dressed or that her laughter might be heard by the others. I was furious with her for putting me in such a position. I got my arms out of the bundle as best I could, dumped it on the floor, and left the room, trying to look dignified. I could hear her laughing all the way down the stairs."

"And did you leave the party?" I asked him.

"No. How could I? It would have taken some explaining, and Girish would never have forgiven me for leaving. I went downstairs, had supper, and even danced with Lalita afterward. She was highly amused by it all. But I avoided her house like the plague after that."

"You have no taste for adventure, Sanad," I remarked.

"Not with a witch," he said.

"Trent was nice to me," Sanad told me. "He invited me to dinner. He needn't have taken any notice of me outside

the office. I suppose he asked me because of Father, and perhaps because he wanted to find out how presentable I was socially. I was going to wear my *achkan* to his house, the one I had had made for Girish's wedding, but Girish wouldn't hear of it. He made me wear his dinner-jacket instead. It was tight for me, and I felt uncomfortable and hot, but that's the way I went to dinner."

Sanad told me the thing he remembered most clearly about the evening was the fact that on the immaculately clean drive leading to the streamlined building where the Trents had their flat, he had seen the carcass of a dog rotting under a swarm of ants and flies.

"It made the contrasts I had already seen in Calcutta very distinct in my mind. And the dinner highlighted them. There were five or six other guests, all English, all in the Company. I didn't know what the conversation was about for the first hour or so. I didn't have the grace to contribute to it, partly because I was feeling so uncomfortable in Girish's dinner-jacket and partly because I wasn't drinking and everyone else was. I didn't know a soul, and nobody bothered about me very much. When I kept refusing a drink, both Mr. and Mrs. Trent were quite alarmed. She kept saying: 'Really not? It isn't a matter of conviction or anything dreadfully earnest like that, is it?' Finally I told her I was keen on my tennis and didn't drink so that I'd keep in better shape. That cleared the atmosphere like magic. Tennis was something I had in common with them. They pounced on it like a password, and we discussed its history, its merits, and its techniques in Europe, America, and the Commonwealth until we wore the subject threadbare. Mrs. Trent was so relieved there was a topic I could talk about. I overcame the embarrassment of refusing a drink that way, too. They must have felt a chap who was that keen on tennis must be a decent sort, after all. You know, I shouldn't be surprised if Trent decided to offer me an opening in the firm after watching me play tennis at Government House in Lucknow.

Tennis and Government House—an infallible combination for acceptability!”

Sanad’s cynicism was of the amused variety. There was no rancour in it.

“Well, after a long discussion about tennis from every conceivable angle we talked of other things—of everything, in fact, but what was most interesting. There was a war on, but nobody even mentioned the subject or any event of it. There were premonitions of famine in Bengal, but no one seemed remotely aware of them. There we were, in the most elegant of dining-rooms, eating course after course of excellent food, talking about polo, fishing, and the weather. It was like a never-never land of inanity, deliberately sealed and barred against an intelligent awareness of the real world. I wondered how they would react if I suddenly said: ‘By the way, I saw the decaying carcass of a dog on my way here. It was lying right in the middle of your beautiful drive, and cannas were blooming merrily on either side of it.’

“They talked about horses and racing and about the special transport that was to bring horses by rail for a big event. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask why, if horses could be brought, grain could not be brought and stored, too, but that would have been in bad taste. In any case, they would not have been concerned about it. It was a happy war for Selkirk and Lowe. Profits had never been higher. I went home with the feeling that an immense masquerade was going on in Calcutta, and that if one tore off the masks and finery, all the ugly rotting structure underneath would be revealed.”

In view of Sanad’s extreme youth during his stay there, and his unawareness till that time of any world beyond the gracious one of his childhood, I thought this a fairly shrewd observation.

“When I got home,” Sanad went on, “I found Devaki in the drawing-room painting her toenails. She had not used nail polish when I had first met her, and she had had long hair then. Now it was cut to the fashionable length. She was



very pretty, but she looked like anybody else, which, I suppose, was what she wanted. And she had started calling me darling. That was new, too.

" 'Well, darling, did you pass the test?' she asked.

" 'It was a foregone conclusion,' I told her. 'I can play tennis.'

" 'You are a born grumbler,' she said. 'Isn't tennis-playing a better qualification than peeling vegetables or making pickles? And that's what you or your poor wife would be doing for the boss if you'd joined an Indian firm.'

"She was struggling with the toes of one foot, and she gave me an appealing glance.

" 'Darling, d'you think you could help me with this one?'

" 'No,' I replied shortly.

" 'It was bad enough,' Sanad told me, "trying to keep awake at parties every night and having to wear Girish's dinner-jacket, but I was damned if I was going to start painting anyone's toenails. I told Devaki so. She just sighed and said: 'Darling, you're so gauche.' "

The offices of Selkirk and Lowe were situated in an imposing four-storeyed building on Clive Street. In the 1860's, after the administration of India had passed from the East India Company to the Crown, and when Calcutta had been little more than a port with all its activity centring on the docks, Selkirk and Lowe had been one of the companies that unloaded goods from incoming ships. Its original offices had consisted of warehouses.

At the end of his period as probationer Sanad was sent for by John Trent and informed that he was to start work in the Sharanpur branch as assistant to the manager, Cyril Weatherby. Trent named Sanad's salary.

"I was surprised by the figure," Sanad told me. "I had understood it would be higher. Ordinarily I don't suppose I would have been difficult about it, but my talks with Girish had convinced me I must do what I thought best, and not

be swept along with the crowd or do what was 'done.' It may have been stupid of me, because it could have cost me my job, but I was in a stubborn mood and couldn't help myself. I told Mr. Trent what I had expected.

"That is what we start our British recruits on,' Trent explained. 'But they have a different contract altogether. You must remember they leave their country to come and work out here. You are in quite a different position.'"

Sanad had been obdurate. "I'm sorry, Mr. Trent, that is not what I understood."

I asked Sanad why he had made an issue of his salary. Trent's argument had sounded reasonable enough.

"I felt they owed it to me," said Sanad. "The very least they could do was to pay me as much as they did a British recruit."

"But why?" I asked.

"I went into the history of the firm. I was interested in its beginnings. Selkirk and Lowe was one of the companies that took over the cotton trade from the East India Company. It wasn't called Selkirk and Lowe that far back, but it was the firm from which Selkirk and Lowe derived. The East India Company, as you know, monopolized the trade in Bengal, killing it forever as an independent Indian industry. Lancashire cotton flourished only because all Indian competition was wiped out. Well, since Selkirk and Lowe owed its very existence and certainly all its wealth to this monopoly, I felt the balance needed redressing. The very least they could do was to pay me back a fraction of what they had taken from India."

"I don't suppose you explained all this to Trent."

Knowing Sanad, I thought it quite possible that he had done this.

"Of course not. As a matter of fact it wasn't necessary."

John Trent had been exasperated. He had discussed the matter with his colleagues, and reports of this had filtered

through the office. If the boy was going to be obstinate at this early stage, perhaps they hadn't made a wise decision about him. The trouble with the young fellow was that he didn't really need this job. He had quite enough to live on, as it was. But, then, that was the sort of man they wanted, an Indian with some background and money of his own, someone who could maintain a standard, know how to live and entertain well. Otherwise they could have employed the beggars in their hundreds. Then, too, Trent did not want any unpleasantness, because he knew Govind Narayan and liked him. He had enjoyed his hospitality on several visits to Lucknow.

"I suggest you write to your father about this matter and be advised by him," he had told Sanad, dismissing the subject and leaving it to Govind Narayan's good sense to bring the boy round.

Sanad had written to his father, and Govind Narayan had replied promptly:

*My dear boy:*

*I was pained to get your letter. I realize the salary they offer to begin with is not what you expected, but I am surprised that you should attach importance to it at this stage. You are, after all, just beginning, and a great opportunity to show your abilities lies before you. By making an issue of this at the start you are jeopardizing their good opinion of you. I strongly advise you to accept their terms. In time you will work your way up to a higher figure.*

*Naturally, I understand your desire to have enough for your expenses, and I shall make up the extra amount to you in the form of an allowance for as long as you like.*

*I trust you will speak to Mr. Trent as soon as possible and tell him you have changed your mind. Your mother and I are expecting a great deal of you, and you must not disappoint us.*

*Your loving Father*

Sanad had read his father's letter with a mixture of affection for his generosity and impatience that he had not understood the point at issue. His father and mother lived in an isolated world of their own—how isolated he had not understood until he had come to Calcutta. They were untroubled by what went on beyond their sphere and did not know the competitive world outside. They thought well of everybody, and everybody thought well of them. It was a very pleasant but quite impractical state of affairs. In the circumstances, Sanad chose to rely on his own judgement, feeling that the first hurdle was before him now and that in dealing with it he could either make an impression on this vast organization in some small way or be lost forever in its minor machinery. Only a very young and very brash young man would have behaved as he did. He went to John Trent's office and told him he'd thought the matter over.

"Good. I'm glad to hear it," Trent said, relieved that the issue was settled. "I've had a letter from your father telling me he has advised you to accept our offer."

"Yes, Mr. Trent, but I'm afraid I can't."

Trent looked at him, unbelieving. He had sat in the revolving leather chair and presided at the desk before him for eleven years, he later told his colleagues. He had recruited a procession of young men, all as raw and inexperienced as the one before him, and not one, not one blasted one, had had the nerve to question a decision of his. Impertinent young devil! At the same time, the boy had gumption to stand up to him like that. Perhaps he would be of some use after all.

Trent took a cigar from the box on his table and sniffed it tentatively. "As a special favour and because I have the highest regard for your father," he said, "I shall consider your request. Meanwhile, you will leave for Lucknow on Saturday and arrange to be in Sharanpur by the seventh of August. Your boss, Cyril Weatherby, is a hard man. He will work you as you have never been worked before, but when he has fin-

ished with you you will know your job. I expect to have good reports of you."

"And the salary, Mr. Trent?"

"Yes, yes, that is all settled," he growled. "Now get on with your work and let me get on with mine."

And he dismissed Sanad from his presence.

## CHAPTER VIII

☛ SHARANPUR has not changed much since 1942. There is a new housing development consisting of blocks of incredibly ugly two-storeyed flats, each with a small square of lawn in front. The Club has a swimming-pool it did not have before, and I am told the cinema has been furnished with more comfortable seats. That is about all. It is, and always has been, a singularly unattractive town. If I have chosen to retire here rather than in a more congenial place, that is because I am not particular about my surroundings. It matters little where I live as long as I have my privacy and my few belongings around me. Sharanpur has its advantages, as I know it well. And it is pleasant when I walk or drive through the town to be remembered by people I have known all my life. There are people who are acutely sensitive to environment, who thrive in one and wilt in another. Luckily for me, I am not, and Sharanpur suits me as well as another place.

Sanad, when he arrived here to join Selkirk and Lowe in '42, found it unappealing. I was not here, of course, at the time to watch his reactions to it or any of the incidents that made him drift even further away from the carefully sheltered world of his childhood than his sojourn in Calcutta had. I am setting down here what he told me two years later when I was released from prison, and I have had to reconstruct scenes and conversations from Sanad's own vivid accounts of them. If I am suspected of being fanciful, I can only say, with some regret, that I wish I were inclined to be more fanciful. It is a quality I lack. If I have had to imagine any of the details in this narrative, I have tried to do so without altering the main facts and only to make it more readable.

Sanad arrived in Sharanpur in August. As it happened, it was August 9, a date that will long be remembered because Gandhi had been arrested the night before, and his arrest was the prelude to an avalanche of happenings all over our country which have no place in this account.

It had rained a little during the night in a grudging and desultory fashion, and the morning was no cooler. The August heat rose like steam from the earth. Cyril Weatherby had had a cold shower before breakfast, but already his shirt hung limp on him, and the tie around his neck was an added harassment. Impossible to concentrate on liver and bacon with the back of his neck itching fiendishly. He debated whether or not to remove his tie. On any other day he might have done so, but this morning's paper had warned that there might be trouble in the city. The authorities anticipated riots as a result of the arrest of Gandhi and the Congress leaders. Nothing like keeping up appearances in the face of a crisis, Weatherby believed. No rioting hooligan in the streets would find the sahib without a tie today. Heat or no heat, it was a symbol of correct office gear, and today of all days it must be worn to prove that the British attached no importance to the agitators. The Empire had been built on such decisions as this.

"Is the carriage at the door, Gcorge?" he asked the bearer who removed the breakfast dishes.

The bearer's name was Nihal, but Weatherby had never called him anything but George. Could never remember the blighter's name. He had had a succession of bearers in India, and he had called the lot of them George.

"Yes, sir, it is here. Will the sahib be returning for lunch today?" Nihal asked. His manner displayed a trace of concern.

"Naturally, damn you." This wretched tie was the devil. "Don't I always come home for lunch?"

"If sahib would be advised, it would be better to stay in the office today," Nihal suggested apprehensively.

"Well, I shall come home as usual," said Weatherby, irritated.

Now how the devil could George know that trouble was expected? He didn't read or write, so he could not possibly have seen the news in the Urdu paper. Furthermore, he had been on duty since six o'clock, bringing early-morning tea, preparing the bath and breakfast, so he could not have culled it from local gossip. There seemed to be a grapevine system among these Indians, particularly concerning every activity of Gandhi's.

Nihal followed his employer out to the carriage and handed in briefcase, hat, pipe, and tobacco pouch after him. The horse-drawn buggy was Weatherby's own inspiration, and he congratulated himself on the dashing figure he cut as he piloted it expertly through the streets. Petrol was rationed, and by resorting to a horse and buggy Weatherby set an example of economy and patriotism. Today, tie neatly knotted despite the heat, pork-pie hat planted firmly on his head, he represented more substantially than ever the prominent, law-abiding citizen who made no concession either to the vagaries of the weather or to the eccentricities of the local inhabitants.

The streets seemed much the same as usual. People were going about their business, and there was no sign of impending disturbance but for splashes of red paint on placards tied to trees, pasted on fragments of broken wall, and scrawled on the tarred road proclaiming the slogan *QURR INDIA*.

Nobody stopped the carriage. At the crossing the policeman on duty saluted him as usual, and he turned into the office gates without incident. Only then, and too late, did he see an urchin across the road swoop down, pick up a handful of wet earth from the slush, and aim it deftly at his tie. The gesture was finished before he had time to dodge. It might have been an urchin's prank, but the boy had no mischief in his glance. He did not run away after he had done it, and when the policeman collared him and, apologizing to Weatherby, headed him for the local police station, he neither whim-



pered nor cried, but let himself be led away in sullen silence. Traffic continued on its way, men and women gave the boy no more than a passing glance, and Weatherby, his shirt splattered with filth, entered his office swearing roundly.

Sanad, who had watched the incident from the window, now saw the office electrified by his entrance. The Head Clerk, standing by with letters to be signed, made horrified and sympathetic noises with his tongue.

"Stop clucking like a damned hen and get some water and a towel to clean these stains," Weatherby roared. "And the rest of you get back to work. No need to treat everything that happens like a ruddy *tamasha*."

He caught sight of Sanad, and Sanad somewhat hesitantly introduced himself.

"I've been expecting you," Weatherby glowered, calmer now that a clerk had brought water and was wiping the stain from his shirt. The dark-brown splotch that had been there before had spread to a brownish-beige stain.

"Come into my office," he told Sanad, and, looking down at his shirt: "It's a job for the *dhobi* now."

He glared at Sanad, who had not spoken at all except to introduce himself. "Well, what d'you make of it, eh?" he asked heavily.

Sanad, not knowing whether he meant the stain on his shirt, the situation that had brought it about, or some third quite unrelated matter, started to mumble a non-committal reply.

"Speak up, man!" Weatherby bellowed. "If there's one thing I will not tolerate, it's this infernal mumbling that goes on. If you've got something to say, say it."

Sanad, who had nothing to say, said: "Yes, Mr. Weatherby."

"No sense of responsibility," Weatherby raged on, "from Gandhi down to that bloody little fool who threw this stuff at me. Can't expect to get freedom that way. Only convinces us they're not ready for it."

He sat down in his chair and motioned Sanad to the one facing his desk.

"Wrong method, intimidation. Never worked with us, never will."

He scratched the back of his neck.

"Been itching since morning," he told Sanad, "but I deliberately wore that tie, and I'm damned well going home for lunch."

Sanad soon got used to Cyril Weatherby's irascible manner. But, accustomed as he was to the studied courtesy of his childhood milieu, Weatherby's language startled him at the beginning of their association. He soon realized it was not ill-temper so much as a genuinely limited vocabulary that compelled Weatherby so frequently to resort to words commonly consigned to abuse: "Old bastard" and "bloody fool" were phrases he used as casual descriptive terms. He was rarely angry.

Weatherby was a booming-voiced, red-faced, hard-headed man who believed in wasting no time on anything but the work in hand. His subordinates received a thorough training at his hands, and if they went away with the impression that the boss was a difficult man, that was because in the U.P., where polite language is used even in anger as a deliberate method of sarcasm and the voice is never raised, his bluster was misunderstood. He meant no offence. He simply knew no other way of driving home his point or getting done the work he had assigned. At times a trifle disconcerted by the boom of his own voice in an unanswering void, he felt utterly disgusted and decided that the whole country "might as bloody well be an old ladies' home."

Sharanpur suited Weatherby well. It had no pretensions to culture. In fact, it made no pretence of being anything but a flourishing commercial city. He did not mind its grime and soot. It had a large British community whose social life revolved around the Club and whose interests centred on their work. No awkward nonsense here about the arts, which in

some of his other posts had made Weatherby feel out of his depth. Here one did a solid day's work and spent the evening solidly drinking after a few sets of tennis. Golf and a bit of *shikar* on weekends, and that was that. Exercise was the thing in this climate. Weatherby had no complaints. The life was all right. He had not been required to make any painful or embarrassing adjustments to new situations in India, as he might have been in another foreign country. In India there were no new situations. Generations of Englishmen before him had smoothed the path for him, building up a code of manners and morals to deal with any situation that might conceivably arise. Weatherby was quite at home.

Weatherby liked the look of Sanad. Healthy-looking specimen, he noted with approval, and told him so—not the all too common skinny type around here which made him feel oversized. He found Sanad keen on his work, which was what he liked to see. Too damned many of these Indians came in on the strength of family and position with not enough guts to put in all the work that was required. Caste system was responsible for that, of course.

If Girish had thought knowing the right people was an important part of one's job, that was because he had not received his training at the hands of men like Weatherby. Right people and wrong people was all dratted nonsense. The work was there and had to be done. After that there was the bottle of whisky, and, as far as Weatherby was concerned, anyone who drank with him was the right person, and those who didn't were mealy-mouthed ninnies and he had no room for them in his social life.

Sanad, he saw to it, went through the mill, touring the Company's out-of-the-way markets, travelling as he had never travelled before, by train as far as trains went, and beyond these points by bus or bullock cart. Weatherby didn't care "how the hell" Sanad got there as long as he did get there. Sanad was required to make detailed reports of his tours, and Weatherby perused them to the last comma and full stop.

It seemed to Sanad he spent very little time in Sharanpur during his first year. "No job is learned sitting on your backside at a desk," Weatherby told him. "Get to know the places you're dealing with. There'll be plenty of desk work after that."

"I'm having some people to drinks at the house this evening," he informed Sanad one morning on his arrival at the office. "Seven o'clock. Black tie." He eyed Sanad shrewdly. "What do you do with your evenings? Got a girl?"

Since most of his evenings had been spent in some uncomfortable conveyance travelling on behalf of Selkirk and Lowe, Sanad thought this an unnecessary question. Apart from this, it would have been impossible to explain to Weatherby that one didn't just have a girl friend. Well-brought-up young Indian women did not go out with young men unchaperoned. To be seen alone in public with a man would have been scandal enough for the rigid code of a provincial town. Sanad would not have dreamed of putting any girl he knew into such a position.

"No, Mr. Weatherby."

"Wasting your time," was Weatherby's cryptic rejoinder. "Come along this evening. It's time you met some of the people we do business with."

Sanad arrived at the bungalow on his bicycle and parked it some distance from the space occupied by cars and their chauffeurs. The chauffeurs had already settled themselves in small groups to smoke and gossip. It would be hours before the sahibs would emerge. Sanad, feeling uncertain, wished he could stay with the chauffeurs. They looked relaxed and cheerful, and much more likely than the sahibs to make him feel at home.

In the spacious drawing-room two overhead fans swung at full speed. Clusters of men in evening dress and women in floor-length gowns stood about the room.

"There you are, Shivpal."

Weatherby propelled him forward, introducing him to a section of the gathering. Sanad heard a welter of names representing the major figures of British business in Sharanpur, and saw a succession of faces that ended in a blur. He was introduced to the wives and daughters.

"Time you got out of that hotel and mixed with people," said Weatherby, flushed and perspiring and in a very good humour. "Get yourself a drink."

Ignoring the tray the bearer brought round, Sanad saw a bottle of lemon squash on the sideboard, conspicuous among the bottles of whisky and gin. He helped himself to lemon-squash-and-soda and stood on the outskirts of a group.

Weatherby caught sight of him. "This will never do," he bellowed. "Get yourself a man's drink."

Sanad found himself holding a whisky-and-soda and, because there was nothing else to do, taking it down in rather large gulps. The room grew brighter and noisier, and the conversation around him rose and fell dizzily on waves of humid heat. Overhead the fans sliced the air as ineffectually as knives cutting cream. They made no impression on the crowd below.

First it was Churchill's latest speech that was being discussed, and then "that bastard" Harilal Mathur, who had come up with six lakhs for the war fund. Showed he had it put away, all right. Sanad felt as comfortably anonymous as a piece of furniture, and would have sat down to take a good look around if this would not have made him conspicuous in a roomful of standing people. Weatherby would have spotted him at once and bellowed at him to help himself to another drink.

"All this talk of war and politics—so tiresome," said Mrs. Hartley, her bored gaze taking in the young man on the edge of the group.

Sanad, with the startlingly clear vision bestowed by an unaccustomed glass of whisky, was fascinated by the thin bare

shoulders thickly sprinkled with orange freckles, and the prominent collar-bone jutting above the low neckline. He did not reply.

"And everything all upset in the city too. One can't live in peace any more. I haven't been able to enter a shop for weeks with all the processions marching around town."

The man beside her assured her genially: "It'll calm down, Gwen."

"I've no doubt it will, Desmond, but it does throw things so out of gear. One simply can't plan."

Sanad wandered to another circle.

". . . most extraordinary memory I've ever come across. There I was just come out to India, and at the Viceroy's House for the first time. I was standing in the presentation line and She was coming down the line greeting everybody. Nothing much, mind you, just a nod and a smile and passing on to the next person. And then you could have knocked me over with a feather. . . ."

Sanad thought this extremely unlikely in view of the speaker's massive proportions, but went on listening.

". . . She stopped right in front of me and said: 'Aren't you Meredith Connell's daughter?' I said I was, and She said: 'Come to lunch tomorrow.' Just like that. She'd never set eyes on me before, you know, but She had a marvellous memory for faces. 'I'd have known that mouth and chin anywhere,' She said. And there I was lunching at the Viceroy's House on my second day in Delhi!"

"Connie, darling, how divine. I'm simply green."

Sanad wandered to the sideboard and refilled his glass.

". . . keep them in jail and deal with the lot of them when the war's over," he heard in the buzz.

"Dear me," sighed the bored Mrs. Hartley, "when is this 'Quit India' nonsense going to be over?"

"When you quit, I suppose," said Sanad with happy logic, his remark clattering like a pebble into the pause.

The group turned to him in some surprise, but when they

saw that it was just old Weatherby's gauche young assistant the interest subsided.

"Oh, I say, laddie," came the indulgent comment from one of the men whom Sanad vaguely remembered was president of some corporation. "Isn't that a bit of a grim remark? What on earth would you people do if we left you to it? The whole idea's preposterous. Of course, if all Indians were like you, with your standard of living, there'd be no question about it."

Weatherby was tired of politics too. "Come on, Hugh," he shouted to someone across the room. "Play something for us. Those numbers you played at Gwen's the other night."

Hugh, going over to the piano, thumped out a succession of lively tunes. Sanad saw Mrs. Hartley's orange-freckled back among those around the piano and her sharp red elbows jiggled this way and that in time to the music. As though conscious of the glance on her, she turned to Sanad during a lull between numbers and flashed him a smile. Mrs. Hartley, Sanad was sure, had no more than the requisite number of teeth, but on her they managed to appear far more than she needed.

"Do you play tennis, young man?" she asked.

Sanad admitted he did.

"Well, that's settled, then. You must come to my next tea and tennis."

Mrs. Hartley was always on the look-out for new talent for her tea-and-tennis parties. There was very little one could do to relieve the boredom of life in Sharanpur, and her gatherings had become an institution. Sanad thanked her and slid from the circle as soon as he could, glancing around for Weatherby to take his leave.

"What, going already?" Weatherby roared. "Have one for the road."

He poured a drink from the sideboard and handed it to Sanad.

"Not been awkward for you, has it?" He gave Sanad a sharp glance of concern.

"Awkward?"

"No other Indians here tonight, I mean. Don't know any others, actually."

Sanad met Marion Finch at Mrs. Hartley's, where the elite of Sharanpur's business houses gathered on Saturday afternoons. Marion was staying with the Hartleys. From her chair in the shade she watched him appreciatively one afternoon as she sipped a glass of port and lemonade. She was spending a few months in Sharanpur, and time was hanging heavy on her hands. Gwen Hartley was a well-meaning old soul, but she was a bore, and in all this time she had not been able to produce one interesting escort. Marion was tired of that old buffoon, Ronald Sharpe, who had been appointed to squire her at the various social functions. It was true that Marion wanted to get married, but not to the first individual who came her way, even though he did have a tempting bank balance. Marion intended to weigh other prospects first, and while she was weighing them she saw no reason not to enjoy herself.

She had watched Sanad on several Saturday afternoons, and had seen him at the cinema once or twice. He had always been alone. Probably he didn't have a girl friend. Sharanpur, she thought, was deplorably provincial after Bombay. There at least one saw women about, and frequently in shorts and slacks. There was no stigma attached to smoking or drinking either. Marion wondered whether Sanad had ever taken a girl out. She thought of asking Gwen to include him in the group who were staying for drinks that evening.

"Gwen," she said, when her hostess in a wide-brimmed straw hat came to sit beside her, "you have an extra girl this evening now that Clarissa's husband has dropped out. Why not ask Sanad to stay on?"

"Well, I don't know," Gwen began hesitantly. "The others are all older than he is. He's a very nice young man, but don't you think he might feel out of place?"



"Not at all," said Marion tartly. "You make us all sound like Methuselahs."

"My dear, I meant myself and the others of my age," Gwen hastened to explain.

Marion could be difficult when she chose. And she wasn't a day under thirty, which made her considerably older than Sanad. Gwen wished she would cut short her trip and go back to Bombay. She didn't seem to fit in at all. However, here she was, and it was just as well to keep her happy. If only Ronald Sharpe would hurry up and propose!

"Very well, then, I'll ask him. It might be a good idea. He's such a nice young man," she finished lamely.

"Young man," Gwen asked him later, "won't you join us for drinks this evening and stay on for supper? We always have a cold buffet on Saturday nights. It's the bearer's night off, you see."

Sanad hesitated.

"Oh, do. Cyril tells me you're at the hotel, and it can't be much fun there."

Going back to his room at the Royal Hotel every evening was certainly not much fun. It would be nice to have an evening out, for a change. Sanad was tired of the watery soup and the greasy chops the hotel served for dinner. He did not understand why they could not serve Indian food. Once he had hinted that Indian dishes might be included in the menu. Mrs. Fisher, the proprietress, had exclaimed: "Oh, of course, Mr. Shivpal, you mean curry!" And day after day till he begged her to revert to the original menu he had had fish, eggs, or meat floating in the same strong mixture of curry powder, whose aroma afterward continued to pervade the dining-room and to seep through his clothes. He had thankfully gone back to the greasy chops. Mrs. Fisher, shrugging, had not commented on this failure of her Indian food.

The Royal Hotel had a look of disgraceful old age about it which was quite inexcusable, for it had been built only thirty years earlier. Most buildings had had a heyday. The Royal

Hotel had never had one. It had always looked exactly as it looked when Sanad arrived in Sharanpur: an unsightly reminder of someone's pitiful lapse in taste. A new coat of paint would not settle the matter. The hotel needed to be completely rebuilt, and some interest and imagination were needed in the running of it. The complacent Mrs. Fisher could not be troubled by such trifles. It was the only hotel in the town, so there was no competition. Visitors were obliged to stay there. As a concession to the growing prosperity of Sharanpur and her own expanding bank balance, she had, a few years earlier, had modern sanitary fittings installed, and having thus done her duty by the public, she sat in her office with a disreputable tomcat, both watching the untidy garden without a qualm of conscience. Mrs. Fisher, who attributed her swarthy complexion to her Portuguese descent but spoke of England as "home," had, nevertheless, never left Sharanpur.

The other guests had already arrived when Sanad entered Mrs. Hartley's drawing-room. Marion sat at the piano. She saw him and waved to him to join her on the piano bench. He was relieved, as this saved him from the awkward first moments of standing around waiting to be included in some group.

"Recognize this?" She smiled, her fingers busy on the keys.

"No," he replied, embarrassed. "I'm afraid I don't know much about music."

A bearer offered him a tall glass of whisky and soda.

"Take one for me, too," Marion said. "I've been watching you on the tennis court. You do play awfully well."

"It's all I can do," Sanad said frankly.

"Do you ride, too? We might go riding some time. I don't know the country at all well, and I'm told there are some places of interest to see—that is, of course, if you're free."

"I'd like to," Sanad said.

He felt much more confident with the whisky-and-soda going down and giving him a tingling feeling. Marion, who in

her tennis kit looked a bit thick in the ankles and wrists and slightly red-faced from her exertions on the court, was quite attractive in the soft lamplight on the piano. He was flattered by the fact that she had singled him out for her attention, and conscious that it was high time he learned something about the pastimes of which Girish was so suave an exponent. "Grow up and stop being an old woman," Girish had said, and Sanad decided it was time to do both.

He had kissed one or two girls experimentally, and with Charlie Youngman, a precocious friend of his school days, he had indulged in a few excited scuffles with a girl he had met through Charlie. Of these Sanad remembered chiefly the high-pitched squeals of "Don't" and "You mustn't," which had put him off at the time. Charlie, he gathered, had never minded these warnings. "They always say that," he had explained to Sanad from the superiority of his greater experience. "You're not to stop just because of that." But Sanad had found the hysterical accompaniment too unnerving.

Before the evening was over he had kissed Marion in Mrs. Hartley's garden, where Marion had conveniently led him on the pretext of its being hot indoors. Marion, thank goodness, neither squealed nor told him not to. He had felt a fool with her lipstick all over his mouth, and hadn't known how to end the kiss so confidently begun. But Marion had tided him over these clumsy moments.

Later their rendezvous took place in the countryside, where they went riding. It was dry, dusty country bordered by the distant mud huts of neighbouring villages and punctuated by the ruins of old forts. It was historic territory; battles had been fought there. When Marion lay back with a satisfied smile on her lips, she sometimes reminded him of a cat that had just swallowed the last morsel of a particularly delectable canary.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked.

"Didn't you say battles have been fought on this very soil?"

"Round about here, yes. I don't know about the very spot where you're lying."

"I didn't mean that, idiot." She smiled again. "You're so literal. I was just thinking some ancestor of yours may have fought here long, long ago. I can see him now with a curved dagger flashing in the sun and a cruel look in his eyes. You are a bit of a barbarian yourself, you know."

"She made me feel like a coveted trophy, the way she talked sometimes," Sanad said when he told me about it later. "And I had the feeling Marion collected trophies of this kind the way *shikaris* come to India to bag tigers. But I was grateful to her. Sharanpur without her would have been deadly."

"She was always asking me whether I thought she should get married or not," Sanad told me. "One day I said she should, that every girl should get married."

"There's always Ronald Sharpe," she had said sarcastically, but her sarcasm had escaped Sanad.

"Yes, what about Ronald Sharpe?" he had said. "He's awfully nice, and he wants to marry you, doesn't he? That would be a very good idea."

Marion had found his eagerness to see her married rather disconcerting. How could he be so casual about it when he had just been making love to her himself?

They could not go to the Club together because membership was not open to Indians, but they went to the cinema and played tennis and met sometimes at other people's houses.

"Why don't we dine at the Club?" she suggested one evening.

"You know I can't," he replied, irritated.

"Of course you can." She reminded him that it was the one night of the month when members could invite Indian guests.

"If you think I'm going there on sufferance, you're mis-

taken," Sanad flared. "We're good enough for everything else, but not when it comes to membership."

"Stop sulking about it," she said. "You're much too sensitive. Personally, I think it's a ridiculous rule, but there's nothing I can do about it. It isn't meant for people like you, but there'd be hundreds of disreputable ones coming in with you, don't you see?"

Sanad had never identified himself with those others. As far as he was concerned, there were several Indias, and his was the one of privilege he had always known. He felt irritated at being lumped with the general run of Indians just because he happened to be one too, and he was furious at being forced into a position where he had to defend them.

He realized he was no different from all the others when it came to membership in a club. He might wear a better-made suit, speak better English, and have a larger income than they, but he was one of them just the same. He was not and never could be anything else. It occurred to him, as it had in Calcutta, that his parents had gone to a great deal of trouble and expense moulding him to be a figure that would never have any reality.

He did not feel that he belonged in either the British or the Indian set of Sharanpur. He did not associate himself with Indians of a lower social rung than himself, and he certainly did not belong with the English. With them there were boundaries beyond which he was not socially acceptable. The Englishman he knew best was Weatherby. Sanad liked him despite his brusque ways, but also considered him an incongruous figure in Sharanpur, with his pork-pie hat and his horse and buggy. Was it possible, thought Sanad, that anyone could live the greater part of his adult life in a country and so scrupulously avoid picking up the language or a shred of information about how its people lived? Weatherby might as well have been living in his native Lancashire for all the effect India had had on him, except for the coars-

ening of his complexion and a considerable increase in his capacity for alcohol.

"We'll dine at my hotel," he told Marion shortly, "unless you want to dine alone at the Club."

"Don't be silly," she said. "You know I want to dine with you."

Marion rather enjoyed these flurries of temper on his part. They gave her that tingling sensation of the barbarian ancestor all over again. She was a domineering woman, used to having her own way. It gave her a thrill of pleasure to be ordered about by this young man who, when he was in one of his surly moods, would brook no nonsense.

"And where shall we go afterward?" she asked archly.

"Up to my room, where else?" he said baldly.

"Oh, but what about Mrs. Fisher? What will she say? She's always in her office watching everyone come and go."

"She'll say we went up to my room and went to bed," he said brutally. "I am certainly not going to lie around on brambles out in the open countryside at this time of night."

He was behaving badly and he knew it, but it was the only way he had of salvaging his hurt pride over the Club incident. Marion debated whether or not to make a scene and force him to apologize, but her common sense won the moment. It would be pointless, she decided, to waste the evening quarrelling when there were pleasanter ways of spending it and there was no certainty that Sanad would apologize.

She had wanted to make something romantic of the affair, something he would remember, thinking of her as his first real love. Sanad had a rather disappointing tendency to treat it as another outdoor sport and to excel in it with the same zest and animation he brought to all the games he played. But she did not hold this against him.

When she was leaving Sharanpur she wondered whether or not to give him a souvenir, and in the end decided against it, as Sanad was not sentimental and might laugh at her. However, he was sweet, she thought, coming to see her off

at the station, getting her luggage put into her compartment, paying the coolies, and ordering coffee and sandwiches for her before the train started.

"Oh, look, there's that nice young man," Gwen Hartley had trilled when she had seen him threading his way through the confusion on the platform, and Marion, who had rung up Sanad the night before to say good-bye and had not expected him to come to the station, was delighted. Not by a glance or the slightest pressure of his hand did he indicate, however, that he was sorry to see her go. She searched about at the last minute for something memorable to say which would always remind him of this moment, but there was really nothing to say except "Good-bye."

And Sanad replied with a bright smile: "Well, good-bye."

Oh, well, thought Sanad, as the train steamed out of the station, Marion had found Sharanpur dull. She would find Bombay much more fun.

"I think it was the very day Marion left that one of the clerks, Raghubir, wore a Gandhi cap to the office," Sanad told me. "He was an insignificant-looking fellow, the type you can see every day of your life without his making the smallest impression on you. I don't remember having seen him before at all. He had a corner desk, and he never spoke to anybody. He was too minor ever to make an appearance in Weatherby's room, and I don't think he had any dealings with the Head Clerk either. For all anybody knew, he might always have worn a Gandhi cap or a circus clown's outfit. He came and went completely unnoticed."

The day had been a harrowing one for Weatherby. He had been wrestling with unexpected problems all morning, and when he entered the clerks' room on his way to lunch he was in a fighting mood. There had been trouble in the city. Two truckloads of the Company's stocks had been set afire by an angry mob. The atmosphere was full of explosive signs. Instead of the clatter of typewriters, the rustle of papers under

the fans, and the busy hum of an office in session which usually greeted Weatherby when he entered the clerks' room, apathy hung in the air and only a few typewriters clacked listlessly. In a corner of the room an open window framed the timid profile of Raghubir, with a bobbing Adam's apple and a receding chin topped by a Gandhi cap. The cap was all that Weatherby needed to excite his irritability. He stopped in his tracks and bellowed:

"You in the corner! Take that bloody thing off your head!"

The clerk jumped to his feet as though startled by a clap of thunder and snatched the cap off. The wretch was quivering like a cornered rat, Weatherby saw with disgust.

"That's better," he said, and then, addressing the room: "I gather you are all here because you need your jobs. If I catch any man in this office turning up in that cap, he will be out of here faster than shit off a shovel. There are enough kinds of headgear in this God-forsaken country for you to choose from."

And, planting his own pork-pie hat on his head, he stalked out to the waiting horse and buggy. He felt sickened by the incident, he told Sanad afterward, both because of the Gandhi cap and because of the abject look on the man's face. Most maddening thing about these clerks was that they all looked as if they were about to be beaten. Made one look a bullying swine. Undernourished collection—couldn't even stand up to one with any guts. And then it occurred to Weatherby that if they had been able to stand up to one, one wouldn't have been in India.

Sorry for the clerk, Sanad sent for him. He came with the oddly tragi-comic look of a scarecrow about him in his ill-fitting suit. Raghubir, Sanad found out, was a graduate of Sharanpur College. He had acquired an M.A. degree there some months earlier. Thus armed to earn a living, he had, after leaving college, discarded his *dhoti-kurta* for a suit that ill became his narrow-chested frame. He had learned to take down shorthand in English and to type out ninety English



words a minute on the typewriter. He was extremely proficient in the language, and if only his English had been spoken with the correct accent he might have been an altogether more confident person.

At home, after his mother had served him the food he loved best and he had sat down cross-legged on the floor among his friends to play the *tabla* with the rapt intoxication of a born musician, now throwing his head back, now rolling it from side to side, he bore no resemblance to the Raghubir who sat rigidly upright in a straight-backed chair from nine till five every week-day.

"Had you ever worn a Gandhi cap before?" Sanad asked him.

"No sir, never," he said anxiously. "How could I wear such a cap with a foreign suit? It would not be fitting."

"Then why did you wear one today?"

"It is not mine, sir. I was coming out of the house this morning and there were some *goondas* in the street. Only to torment the people they were there, sir. They were shouting slogans and threatening passers-by. I was afraid for my mother. She is alone all day in the house. When they jeered at me and threatened to puncture my bicycle tyre if I did not wear this cap, I made no trouble. Even then they pushed me off my bicycle when I got on, and I had a hard time getting away from them, sir. I was late arriving here, and at once I started to work, forgetting I was still wearing the cap. It will not happen again, sir."

Sanad was surprised to find himself in the role of the disapproving sahib. "I am not asking you not to wear it," he said. "But of course it is better, since you work here and Mr. Weatherby does not like it, that you do not."

"I understand, sir. In any case, I do not wear it."

Sanad turned to go.

"The Mahatma himself does not wear one, sir."

The hooligans in the streets who knew no better, the sahib in the office who thundered his rage, what did either of them

matter? Raghubir's tone implied. The innocent cap they both used as their target was tossed back and forth between them like a child's rubber ball, while the one for whom it was named was supremely unconcerned about it, about anything so trifling. The storm raged around him, but his dignity was not a garment to be spattered by mud.

"Where do you live, Raghubir?" Sanad asked abruptly.

"Just past the post office, sir. It is the yellow building on the left. My mother and I occupy two rooms on the ground floor."

"Will you be able to get home all right?"

Raghubir smiled. "No harm will come to me, sir."

Sanad, as he watched the small, thin figure pedal away, was not so sure.

## CHAPTER IX

☛ I WAS released from detention in early December 1944 and left for Sharanpur immediately. During my first few days at home I cannot say that I was either happy or settled. I was still numb at finding myself out of prison, and I only gradually came to life. It was a week or so after my release that I woke to the surprise of a frost-spangled garden, suddenly realizing that the brief Sharanpur winter had come. I had wakened feeling fresh and hungry and with an appetite for the foods I had not eaten for so long. I had an urge to go to the bazaar and buy fruit, the thing I had been starved for above all during my imprisonment. Hiring a *tonga*, I set out after breakfast.

My cousin had already taken the car to the mills, and, though he would have sent it back for me had I telephoned him, I had no wish to delay my departure or to make elaborate arrangements for the first activity that had taken my fancy since my release. I wanted to take advantage of my mood while it lasted, and for the moment nothing mattered but the glorious adventure of buying fruit.

I could have gone to the Kashmir Fruit Mart, a small, neat shop in the central shopping area where carefully arranged shelves held rows of expensive fruits, and where in addition there were glass-topped counters displaying nutmeats and raisins in cellophane wrappings and boxes of dried apricots and peaches. It was closer to the house and more convenient than the noisy bazaar, but it would have an air of constraint about it—a room, after all, enclosed by four walls and attended by a grave, formal attendant. I wanted the freedom of the open air, not rooms with walls, and winter's bright and abundant fruits displayed in exuberance all along the side-

walk. I wanted the clamour of the vendors' shrill voices seeking me out, and I saw myself walking royally among them, rolling an apple around in my hand or holding a cluster of purple grapes to the light as though they were jewels of great price.

I was not disappointed in the wealth of fruit I found. Tangerines, guavas, and custard apples were arrayed in pyramids for my delight. I walked about, buying extravagantly, and was soon clutching a number of paper bags and bundles.

"How much?" I asked, holding up a guava, its aroma tickling my nostrils.

"Three rupees a dozen," was the outrageous demand.

Yet, not even hesitating, I replied: "Two dozen" and laughed out loud at the open-mouthed astonishment on the vendor's face. It was a day for grand gestures, not for petty bickering over the earth's most generous gift.

A car rudely honked an insistent horn, raising a protest of dust along the road. Turning to see who this intruder in my domain was, I saw Sanad scowling at the wheel, forced to wait while a cow picked her lady-like way across the cluttered street. I had not known that Sanad was in Sharanpur, and I shouted to attract his attention. He drew the car to the curb with difficulty, then got out and caught me in a bear-like embrace, lifting me off the ground completely. Sanad had grown taller and considerably heavier than I, and my sojourn in jail had in any case made me several pounds lighter than my normal weight. In the first few seconds of laughter and back-thumping we must have asked each other a dozen incoherent questions, neither understanding what the other said. Then Sanad paid off my *tonga* and pushed me with all my bundles of fruit into his car and we drove off.

"I have to see Morari Lal, an agent of the Company's," he explained. "I'm taking you along."

I protested that he should let me go home and that we could meet later for lunch, but Sanad would not hear of it.

"Now that I see you after all these years, do you think I'm

going to let you disappear till lunch-time? By then you may be in Cape Comorin reviving a village industry. Nothing doing. You'll come with me, and from now on I'm not letting you out of my sight."

So we spent the morning of our reunion at the bazaar shop of Morari Lal. As we drove along I saw with pleasure how Sanad had changed in the past two and a half years. It is a long stretch between eighteen and a half and twenty-one, and he looked vital and alive and as pleasant and vigorous a sight as any man could hope to find after the monotony of prison life.

Morari Lal welcomed us with due ceremony. Outside, a bedlam of traffic rumbled past and the beggars made their never ending plea for generosity. Within, his shop was clean and orderly. A spotless sheet was spread on the floor where Morari Lal and his assistants sat to conduct their business. One of them, a *munshi*, sat facing a low, oblong wooden table on which the account books were kept. He wrote dipping his reed pen into a bottle of Swan ink, blotting carefully as he proceeded. Morari Lal interrupted to ask him to produce refreshments for us, and, laying down the pen, he went behind the partition at the back of the shop.

I sat on the floor, and Sanad, declining the chair they offered him in deference to the suit he wore and the company he represented, sat down beside me. We accepted the *pān* thy offered us. Sanad looked awkward, I thought with amusement, not accustomed to the floor as his father was, looking out of place from the maroon tie to the highly polished shoes with maroon silk socks showing above them. He and Morari Lal had not seen each other for a long time, apparently, and they talked of the weather and enquired after each other's health as it was only polite to do before launching into business matters.

"Sahib is like the moon of Id," Morari Lal complained in courteous Urdu. "We have not had the privilege of his presence for some time."

Sanad apologized, saying the work of the office had been claiming his attention. Then, because he spoke Urdu haltingly, the conversation meandered into English, though Morari Lal continued to season his portion of it with a liberal sprinkling of Urdu.

"And how is your own business doing, Morari Lal?"

Morari Lal, besides being an agent for Selkirk and Lowe was a successful businessman in his own right.

"Better now, better." He beamed, stroking his bristling moustache. "Perhaps sahib had not heard that for some time I employed the services of an English sahib."

"No, I hadn't," said Sanad, surprised. "And have his services been profitable?"

"Alas, no. It is only now that I have dispensed with them and engaged my own nephew in his place that we are well off again. This Englishman was a white sahib, after all. He had his own ways, and there was no changing them. First I had to pay him a white sahib's salary—two thousand rupees a month. A staggering amount, you will admit. Then I had to provide him with a servant to suit his position and all manner of needless allowances. I was near to ruin. Every evening he would consume an immoderate amount of whisky, for which, you understand, I also had to pay. A very expensive employee," Morari Lal recalled sadly, shaking his head. "But now my own nephew is in his place, so all is well. I pay him two hundred rupees a month—just pocket money, of course, for he lives and eats under my roof, and his children are my responsibility. He wears *dhoti-kurta* like myself, and like myself he drinks only *Ganga-jal*. And all that money wasted before is put to more useful purposes than for the abeyance of one sahib's appetites!"

Morari Lal's ample tummy trembled with laughter at having thus easily solved his problem, and his sleek round face was wreathed in smiles.

"Sanad Sahib, you must be familiar with the saying that one is likely to overrate only two things in life: one's own in-

telligence and another's wealth. This Englishman thought my funds were limitless!"

"I think he was justified in thinking so," Sanad smiled. "Every time I come here I find improvements in your shop. You seem to be doing well."

"With your blessings and God's will." Morari Lal gracefully acknowledged the compliment in the traditional manner.

"You know," Sanad told him, "while you and I have been prospering, my friend here has been in jail. He has only just been released."

Morari Lal looked pained. "Ah, well," he said piously, "we must all serve in our separate ways."

I smothered a smile, thinking that, though he was far removed from Govind Narayan, he was not unlike him.

"We must celebrate your friend's release," said Morari Lal, who was more at home on the subject of food and drink than on that of ideology.

In a little while an errand boy arrived with hot *puris* and *tarkari*, and we shared them amid more anecdotes of Morari Lal's triumphs over those who regularly tried to deplete his profits. Afterward he sent his assistant to the inner room of the shop again, and the man returned with two handsome baskets of fruit and a tray of assorted sweetmeats made of crushed almonds, pistachios, and shredded coconut, all covered with shining layers of beaten silver. He laid these beside Sanad and came back with a wooden crate containing six bottles of whisky and six of brandy. The agents during the Christmas season and on other festive occasions usually sent offerings of fruit, sweets, and, to their foreign associates, alcohol.

"The sweets have been prepared in my household with the purest ingredients. You will honour me by accepting them."

Sanad accepted the fruit and sweets, but the alcohol represented too costly a gift and he declined it in spite of Morari Lal's insistence. When he reported his meeting back in the

office Weatherby shook his head over Sanad's refusal of the alcohol. "Should have taken it. I always do. Don't want to hurt their feelings, you know."

During that winter I looked about for a house of my own, not wanting to impose on my cousin's hospitality. He was a large-hearted person, and he felt that in assuming ownership of the mills after my father's death he had already deprived me of what was lawfully mine. The least I could do, he said, was to live in my childhood home as head of the family, and he would look upon me as an elder brother, acting on my advice in all matters. Since my mother had died, however, I could no longer think of the old house as home, and I wanted more than anything else to have a small place of my own with one servant to look after my wants, and the minimum of encumbrances in the way of furniture and possessions. In my cousin's home I could not have imposed such conditions, even in my own part of the house, because it would have hurt his wife's feelings. Woman-like, Sheela would have wanted me to be comfortable after her own fashion, to eat the variety of dishes prepared for the entire family, and to be sociable with them after meals in the big central courtyard while the children romped about us. I had lost what little taste I had had for family life of this order, and I would only have dampened their affection by my lack of enthusiasm. They were disappointed by my attitude, but agreed to my living apart on condition that I would come frequently to the house for meals.

The accommodation I found for myself was ideally suited to my needs. It was a cottage on the edge of the Botanical Gardens, with a semi-circular lawn enclosed by a low wall of rose-bushes. This was enough to screen me partially from the main park, but not to cut me off from it completely. Sitting on my lawn, I could watch people stroll past and observe their behaviour without being observed. I enjoyed this position.

The park was a refuge for the young people who knew no other place for their rendezvous. They came surreptitiously,



afraid of being seen, sometimes with books and pencils or satchels slung over their shoulders, as though to study. The girls were slight and timid-eyed, persuaded to brave tradition for a stolen hour or two, and the boys were sleekly sure of themselves as only the very young can be. Their romances flowered on a regime of rigid secrecy.

Every evening I watched a group of men in the lane adjoining my cottage playing cards by the wavering light of a hurricane lantern. They might have been road-builders or grass-cutters—I don't know what they did during the day, but evening found them playing their game of tattered cards as long as the oil in the lantern lasted. Their murmured voices and an occasional peal of laughter wove a friendly refrain through the dark.

There was a little boy who passed that way toward the day's end, a pitiful figure in his beggar's rags until he spiralled his thin arms upwards in gestures quite unchildlike in their studied grace. Not a single word did he speak, but the language of his eyes and his hands was tragically eloquent, and his begging profession assumed the proportions of an art.

I found it a joy just to sit idle, with the standard lamp at my shoulder shedding its intimate circle of light, and beyond it the darkness drenched with the fragrance of winter flowers. The chief attraction of the cottage was a massive banyan tree that, because it was just inside the boundary of rose-bushes, belonged to me. Ancient, strong, spreading roots trailed earthward from its branches. It was both majestic and peace-giving, and I never grew tired of looking at its solid, friendly bark and imagining what it must have seen enacted on the very soil where I sat.

The cottage had belonged to an Englishman, an artist, who had died some months before. I was lucky to see the advertisement for it in the local paper. I rented it, bought a minimum of simple Indian furniture—a bed with short legs, a low divan, and low chairs for the drawing-room. I hired a servant, a man who would do the cooking as well as the cleaning—a

rare find—and the cottage was my home from that time forward. Sanad made it a habit to drop in whenever he was free, and there in the winter evenings after my release he told me of all that had happened to him since he had come to Sharanpur.

## CHAPTER X

☛ SANAD and I were sitting in my garden one evening, the flaring and diminishing glow of his cigarette the only light, when his bearer hurried in from the lane. There had been a phone call at the hotel for Sanad from the police station, he said. A man who had been injured in a students' demonstration near the cinema had asked that Sanad be notified before steps were taken against him. The police suspected that the man might be one of the troublemakers.

I went with Sanad. On a bench in the office lay Raghubir. His head had been cut open, and blood had clotted in the gash. He lay inert, one arm hanging stiffly over the edge of the bench.

"He was caught in the demonstration in front of the cinema this evening," the officer in charge informed us. "The others have already been locked up. But this one said you would vouch for his innocence."

Sanad was not listening. He was bending over Raghubir. "He needs medical attention," he told the policeman. "I'm taking him to the hospital immediately."

"We just wanted to make sure he was not an agitator," the policeman said, "and when he gave your name and Selkirk and Lowe as a reference, we thought it best to get in touch with you."

"Pick him up," Sanad ordered, "and take him to my car. No, he is not an agitator. He's a clerk in my office."

I could not help thinking how typical it was of Govind Narayan's son, even in an emergency, to ask another to do the work in hand. Sanad could have picked Raghubir up far more easily than the policeman, who was neither as tall nor

as broad as he. But Sanad's voice had the ring of authority. Moreover, he was a sahib employed in the biggest British firm in Sharannur. If he said Raghubir was not an agitator, the officer, it was obvious, did not care to debate the point. The officer was, in any case, tired of these petty disturbances, weary of trying to enforce discipline. The crisis of 1942 had dragged out over a year, and even now there were hostile demonstrations, usually engineered by the students, and occasional casualties. If someone could guarantee the innocence of one of these people, so much the better for the officer: it meant one less prisoner on his hands.

And then I saw a girl standing in the shadow, nervously twisting the corner of her sari round and round one finger. She was the daughter of my friends the Sahais.

"Kusum, what are you doing here, child?" I asked in surprise.

"The police rang up our house. Papaji was out, so I came. Raghubir used to be a student of Papaji's. He must have given our name as a reference."

"We shall take you home."

I put an arm around her and took her out to Sanad's car. Sanad was already at the wheel, his foot on the accelerator, the engine racing noisily. I had to shout the introductions. Kusum did *namaskar*, but Sanad, who had not moved his hands from the wheel in his anxiety to start moving, made no formal greeting at all. I got in beside him, knowing Kusum would not like to sit near a stranger, and she sat beside me.

"Before you take me home I'd like to go to Raghubir's house and see his mother," she said quietly to me.

She spoke to me in Hindi as she always had, and Sanad replied in brusque English: "We're going to the hospital first."

He had never been a careful driver. That night he drove with a dangerous disregard of the laws of the road. He carried Raghubir into the out-patients' department of the hospital and placed him on a chair, supporting him with one arm, waiting in a fever of impatience till he could be examined.

When the doctor came I had the feeling that Sanad might at any moment snatch the dressings from his hands and start applying them himself. There was about him the energy of a coiled spring.

"Will he be all right?" he demanded.

"Yes. That's a nasty cut on the head, but no bones broken, and these bruises will heal in time. These fellows have so little resistance. Anything like this becomes a major threat to their health."

We took Raghubir back to his home, the yellow building beyond the post office which he had described to Sanad, and his mother began to cry as soon as she saw him. Evil days had fallen on the country, she wept, when an innocent man was safe from neither the lawbreakers nor the law.

"He has never been strong," she cried. "If anything happens to him—"

"Nothing will happen to him," Kusum soothed her. "Look after his wound well. He needs rest."

The poor woman was more embarrassed than comforted by Sanad's presence. She did not know whether she should bring a chair for him and offer him refreshment, or leave him and remain in the inner room with her son.

Kusum led her into the inner room and after a while came out and told us it would be best if we left mother and son alone. "He is worrying about his job," she said to me. "He is afraid he may be dismissed."

Sanad was irritated by his own awkward presence in the room, his inability to console Raghubir's mother, and his self-consciousness at not being able to speak good Hindi.

"He needn't worry about the work," he said in English to nobody in particular. "I shall arrange that for him."

Kusum went in again with the message and came out looking less anxious than before. I gave Sanad her address as we got into the car. It was a long time since I had been to the Sahais'. The faded exterior of their bungalow, with its porch hung with a purple waterfall of bougainvillea, had not

changed. On the front verandah stood the *takht* and cane chairs where the Professor received his students, and suddenly I had a longing for a talk with Madan Sahai. But it was late.

"A thousand thanks," Kusum said to Sanad in formal Hindi, and, then turning to me, smiled. "You must come and see us soon."

"Doesn't she speak English?" Sanad asked with a frown as we drove away.

"Of course," I replied. "Very good English."

"Well, why doesn't she speak it, then?"

"She does when she is among English people."

"Damn silly," was Sanad's comment. "Why does she object to the English language otherwise?" he asked after a while.

"Because of her brother, I think. He was killed in '42 by a Tommy. She was very attached to him."

"She needn't condemn everyone who speaks English," said Sanad.

"She doesn't," I said, amused by the importance Sanad was attaching to the incident. I did not know whether he was annoyed at having been put in his place or put out that he didn't speak Hindi.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "I couldn't write a letter in Hindi. I doubt if I could pay a compliment in Hindi."

"Fortunately," I remarked, "she doesn't expect you to do either of those things."

In the dark I could not see his face, but he was silent.

A few days later Sanad spoke to Weatherby about granting Raghubir leave of absence with pay.

Weatherby, humped at his desk, glanced glumly through the correspondence before him. "Who the devil is Raghubir?" he wanted to know.

Sanad told him.

"The one with the Adam's apple, of course. I always knew

he'd get into trouble," said Weatherby. "Why did the blasted fool have to get mixed up in a demonstration?"

Sanad waited.

"It's a matter you'll have to take up with the next man," Weatherby told him. "I'm leaving for the Delhi office next week."

The transfer orders lay on his desk.

"Bloody nuisance," he grumbled. "I'd as soon go to Delhi as put myself on exhibition in a glass case. Whether you know it or not, Sanad, I'm a plain-speaking man of plain habits. All that fancy frippery life up in Delhi isn't going to suit me. Sharanpur is no paradise, but it's a place where an honest man can do a day's work without bowing this way and scraping that like a damned puppet. That's what I shall be doing in Delhi when I'm not sitting on my arse at a desk that has as much work on it as any hay-brained twelve-year-old could handle in an hour."

Sanad was genuinely sorry to hear that Weatherby was leaving.

"And when I think," Weatherby grumbled on, "that in a few years I shall be retiring to a soggy climate and spending my remaining years shivering in front of a fire, and probably not enough fuel to burn in it. . . . The sun gets into your blood and bones, Sanad. You Indians will never realize that. All too damned busy raising hell all the time to notice what you've got to be grateful for."

"Who's coming to this office?" asked Sanad.

"Mark McIvor. He was here once before when I went home on leave. He knows everyone in the office. You'll have to take this matter of the clerk up with him. . . . What're you doing this evening?" he continued.

Sanad remembered the early invitations he had received from Weatherby. It had never been "What are you doing?" or "Are you free?" but "I'm having some people over" and it had been taken for granted that Sanad would come.

"Nothing in particular," Sanad said.

"Come and have a drink, then."

"Is it a party?" asked Sanad. "Black tie or anything?"

"No, blast you," roared Weatherby. "Won't I get enough of that monkey-suit business in Delhi? Come as you are, and come for a drink, not a maiden lady's sip of broth."

Sanad smiled. He had had his first drink at Weatherby's house, and since then he had learned, as Weatherby put it, to drink like a man and not like somebody's "simpering maiden aunt."



## CHAPTER XI

☛ SANAD found the office strangely silent after Weatherby left for Delhi. He wondered whether the Delhi office echoed and boomed with his sallies, or whether the imperial city's regime of protocol had managed to suppress them. Nothing could have been further from Weatherby's blustering air than Mark McIvor's undistinguished appearance. He had, nevertheless, a quiet authority in his manner which was much more effective, when he chose to exercise it, than Weatherby's bombast.

The day Sanad entered his office for the first time, after enquiring through the peon whether he might do so, McIvor rose to shake hands with him. "In future," he said, "come in without any preliminaries. I am at your disposal for any discussion."

"Thank you," Sanad said, and without realizing it he added: "Sir."

McIvor smiled. "You need not call me 'sir.' I am considerably older and, I hope, somewhat more experienced than you, but we are working together. I hope we shall get acquainted both outside the office and in our work."

"Arrange your own tour programmes," McIvor told him when Sanad went to consult him on a tour he was to make. "I shall be interested in your observations and suggestions. From what I gathered from Weatherby, you are fairly well acquainted with all the area this office covers."

Sanad waited in astonishment, trying to get used to his new boss's methods, while McIvor rang the bell on his desk.

"Ask Misra for the file on the Allahabad agent," he in-

structed the peon who appeared. "I'd like you to look through it before you plan your tour," he told Sanad.

The peon returned without the file. "Misra Babu has just left the office for a few minutes, sahib," he said. "I shall get the file as soon as he returns."

McIvor spoke to Sanad about other matters. Twenty minutes went by and Misra had not returned. Sanad began to feel uncomfortable, waiting for the outburst he was sure would come. The peon came back to tell them that Misra had gone to the neighbouring coffee-house for a cup of coffee. McIvor, annoyed by the delay, went into the clerks' room and began ransacking the filing cabinet, muttering to himself all the while. Where the deuce did the man keep it hidden? It was always the same, and had been the same during his previous managership. Whenever a file was wanted, only Misra knew where to locate it. He had been the firm's filing clerk for twenty years, as long as McIvor himself had been with Selkirk and Lowe, and he had no business complicating matters so much. Did the wretched man think he was indispensable to this office? McIvor would get rid of him if it meant hunting all night for that file. Files lay strewn about the floor in chaos, and McIvor's face had grown red with frustration by the time Misra walked in, refreshed by several cups of excellent South Indian coffee.

"Is it a file you seek, sir?" he enquired blandly.

"Well, Misra," McIvor said, straightening himself, "we are not employed on a treasure hunt!"

His irony was lost on Misra. Sanad, watching the scene, waited for the familiar string of abuse. It did not come. Misra, unabashed, asked which file was required and swept into action. Ignoring the mess on the floor, he produced the file from one of the compartments of the cabinet of whose index only he knew the mystery.

At this swift discovery of what he had been labouring so long to locate, McIvor's patience was at an end. "This is the last time, do you hear me, the last time I shall put up with

this. Do you realize, man, that this office cannot function in your absence? It is a monstrous state of affairs! We are held up in important deliberations for want of a file to whose whereabouts only you have the clue. It has got to stop."

Misra drew his rotund figure to its full height and said in an injured tone: "If it is your wish that I resign, then I hand in my resignation today. It is not for me to remind you, sir, that I have loyally served this firm for twenty years, that my services—"

McIvor cut short his ramble. "Oh, be quiet, man, and start putting things in order. But I warn you, unless you arrange a suitable filing system that an ordinary human being can make use of, I don't care how many years you've served the Company."

Misra complained bitterly and audibly after McIvor's retreating back. Did he interfere with the boss's policy? No. Why, then, should the boss interfere with his? After all, a man could step out once in a while when his throat was parched for a cup of coffee. No one could object to that. And as for this brief recreation holding up the sahibs' deliberations, what child's talk was this? Misra faced the roomful of clerks, his hands spread out in an appealing gesture, his expression mystified. Who could tell how many incarnations the soul endured in rebirth after rebirth, and yet the body became impatient within a few moments. This fever of impatience was something he, Ramanuj Misra, would never comprehend.

Sanad, following McIvor back into his room, wondered how he had missed this performance in Weatherby's time, and then he remembered that it could never have taken place. "If any man jack leaves his desk during office hours, I'll tan the hide off him." Obviously no one had stepped out for refreshment in this casual fashion. But, except for Weatherby's regime, it had for years been a regular occurrence in the office and so far Misra had won every round. No power on earth, McIvor told Sanad, no threat could make him

change his filing system. If it had been good enough in 1925, then it was good enough in 1945, and that was all. As long as Misra was filing clerk, his system would prevail.

"It's this appalling lack of a sense of time," McIvor complained. "These people seem to think life is a picnic and that there's no end to the fun and games."

"You are very good to them, Mr. McIvor," Sanad said. "A little severity might carry discipline further."

"No doubt. But they've all worked here a very long time. They're part of the firm. Whatever I may say to Misra, I shouldn't dream of replacing him any more than I should hand in my own resignation. I went to his daughter's wedding the other day," he added irrelevantly. "Ate far too many sweets. They were too good to resist."

McIvor was sympathetic to Raghubir's request for leave of absence with full pay, and Sanad went to see him with the news.

"Raghubir, have you ever considered a job of another kind? Something less monotonous than sitting at a desk all day?"

Raghubir brightened. "Have you any suggestions, sir?"

"I've been thinking about it," said Sanad. "One of our Company's agents, Morari Lal, has a business of his own. He manufactures and sells toys. I know him rather well, and if I spoke to him he might find an opening for you. He would probably pay you more than what you get now, too."

Raghubir looked dubious. "What job would I have, sir?"

"Well, selling the toys, I expect. A number of shops in the bazaar buy their toys from Morari Lal. And, for all I know, he does business in other towns as well. I haven't looked into the matter very closely, but if you are interested I shall find out."

"You are most kind, sir," Raghubir said apologetically. "I am grateful for your interest. But I beg you to consider my position. I am an M.A. and a Brahmin. Can I hawk toys on the street like any common vendor?"

"Do you mean to tell me you are quite content to sit at a

desk and earn a hundred and twenty rupees a month for the rest of your life when another job offers more interest and perhaps an opportunity to do much better?"

Raghubir looked embarrassed. "I have to consider my position, sir. In my community we are very orthodox, and I am not yet married. It would break my mother's heart also. She has sacrificed so much to educate me. After all," he repeated anxiously, "I am an M.A."

Sanad went home exasperated at Raghubir and was all the more exasperated later when he told me about it and got no sympathy from me.

"How do you explain such an apathetic attitude?" he demanded.

"It's easy to explain," I said. "The British intended us to be a nation of *babus*, and that is exactly what we have become. Raghubir is bound hand and foot to his typewriter, and no better prospect will lure him from it. But why blame him? We are all bound hand and foot to our various prejudices."

Sanad did not find this a satisfactory explanation, and continued to worry about Raghubir's future. The clerk and his welfare became an obsession with him, and I teased him about this a good deal, enquiring after Raghubir's pulse and temperature and whether or not he had done his work like a good boy that day. Sanad fussed over him like a mother hen.

"If he didn't look half starved, I don't suppose I'd care what happened to him," he said.

"At this rate, you will be worrying about the entire population of India," I warned him.

Sanad talked with McIvor of a good many things he had never thought of discussing with Weatherby, partly because the opportunity for such talks had never arisen and partly because Weatherby was not interested in anything but his work. McIvor had travelled in India, visiting places of historical and cultural interest. He knew the country better than Sanad

did. He was a student of the political scene and liked to discuss what might happen in India once the war was over. He did not envisage the possibility yet that India might soon become an independent nation.

"Though I don't know, Sanad," he admitted, as they sat over a drink on his verandah one evening. "With more and more Indians of your type coming up, the day isn't far off. Perhaps I shall live to see it."

Sanad realized that the emphasis in such a talk was always placed on Indians like himself. "Young men of your type," the argument went, or: "If everyone had your standard of living." And yet it was not Indians like himself who were doing anything to achieve that independence. Nor were they particularly affected one way or the other whether India was independent or not. For him and others like him it was an academic point, interesting for the sake of argument, but not a matter of vital concern. He was secure in the present regime, and presumably he would be comfortable in the next one. At any rate, the British belief that independence would be given into the keeping of young men like himself was all wrong. It would go into the hands of people not remotely like himself, the millions with whom he had nothing in common. He was as much a stranger to their ways as McIvor was. He said as much, but McIvor disagreed.

"That's not possible, Sanad," he argued. "You must remember that when, eventually, India becomes a self-governing dominion, we shall have left her a trained army and a trained Civil Service. These are the elements that will run the new regime. Why should you have nothing in common with them?"

"They may run it, but you will not hand over power to them. They will carry out policy, as they are doing now, but they will not make it. I wonder, really, where I shall fit into it all when the time does come."

McIvor looked at him in astonishment. "And why should your place be any different from what it is now?"

"The place may be the same, but I wonder if I shall feel as satisfied in it. You know, Mr. McIvor, it is a strange feeling to be midway between two worlds, not completely belonging to either. I don't belong entirely to India. I can't. My education, my upbringing, and my sense of values have all combined to make me un-Indian. What do I have in common with most of my countrymen? And of course there can be no question of my belonging to any other country. I could not feel at home anywhere else. I have never been anywhere else."

"You can't feel at home with 'most' people anywhere, Sanad. That's the sort of broad, sweeping statement that has no meaning. But why not look at it this way—you have the great advantage, with your background, of being able to feel at home among people of your class anywhere in the world. You are not representative of India, it's true, but who is truly representative of India? Surely only the peasant in the field. What would you gain by descending to his level and his standards? Surely he must be helped up to yours if he is ever going to see a better day."

"But in order to help him I should be more closely in touch with him. As it is, the gap between him and me is so great that we haven't even a language in common. What's more, though intellectually I feel I ought to have more contact with him, actually I am not one of those people who have the gift of mixing outside their own class, and I can't work up a sympathy for crowds of people not connected with me. It leaves me peculiarly helpless to do anything."

"That doesn't mean you have no contribution to make to your country," McIvor said. "It merely proves my assertion that you will make it on a level that suits your background and upbringing. I don't see what is to be gained by divorcing yourself from it. Treat it as the link between India and the rest of the world, an indispensable link because so few of your countrymen possess it. There are so few who dress as you do, so few who speak English, and so few, when you come to

think of it, who have had the education which you say sets you apart from India. It is incumbent upon you to maintain this link and strengthen it. The world is in need of a universal culture, a universal language, if not in literal terms, at least in terms of thought and values. Let that be your contribution."

The drowsy warmth of the evening, the hum of insects around the standard lamp, and the whisky he was drinking made Sanad more thoughtful than usual. He could not erase from his imagination the picture of a battered Raghubir who, on his way home from the cinema one evening, had been made the victim of mob violence. Sanad had no sympathy for people not connected with him, he had said, but from that anonymous, faceless mass there inevitably emerged someone like Raghubir, someone to stir to the dregs one's sense of responsibility. Thinking of him, Sanad felt unaccountably guilty, guilty because of the background that separated him from Raghubir, the privileges and opportunities he had enjoyed all his life, and the handsome future he was making his way toward while Raghubir spent all his days imprisoned at his typewriter.

There was no such thing, he decided, as a mass of people who moved one to act. One person in despair, one experience of suffering, one idea led to the rest and gave that anonymous mass identity and reality.

McIvor spoke. "It is not a question of what you will do eventually, but of what you are doing now and will continue to do. You are serving your purpose in the present. There is no need to suppose the future will make other demands on you. . . . It's getting late. Stay and have pot-luck."

Sanad accepted his invitation.

"There's a friend of mine here in Sharanpur I'd like you to meet, Mr. McIvor. I think you and he would like each other. You must come with me when I go to see him."

So Sanad brought McIvor to see me, and we became three instead of two on the lawn in the evenings. On his first few



visits McIvor sat out the evening in uncomfortable silence, sipping the fruit juice I offered him. Afterward he asked Sanad if I would take it amiss if he brought his bottle along. When I assured him I would not, he brought his whisky, and talk flowed smoothly and easily among us, sometimes late into the night.

## CHAPTER XII

☛ I MIGHT not have reacquainted myself with Sharanpur society so soon after my release from prison if Sheela, my cousin's wife, had not insisted that I go with the family to Harilal Mathur's daughter's wedding.

"You can't sit alone doing nothing all the time," she argued.

To Sheela, doing nothing was any activity not involving a pay cheque or an augmented bank account. That I read or wrote for hours on end, savouring to the full my freedom and leisure, was to her a deplorable waste of time. I should, if I insisted on sitting idle, be visiting my friends, mixing with people, and if the truth be told, she scolded, thinking about getting married. When I pointed out to her that I was no longer young and hardly eligible, she said firmly: "Nonsense, a man is never too old." With her usual common sense and candour, she added: "Of course, a young girl would not do for you, but perhaps an elderly lady doctor or lady lawyer." Sheela's conception of "elderly" encompassed anybody beyond thirty. She frankly considered herself past her prime.

She thought for a moment or two. "There's that lady professor at the college," she ventured.

I hastily interrupted to say I would go with her and my cousin to the wedding. Sheela, if not firmly diverted from the subject, was quite capable of going to inordinate lengths to arrange a meeting between me and the said lady professor. Happily, she forgot about this in her approval of my decision.

"Good. It is going to be a huge affair. The Governor is coming down for it from Lucknow. Harilal has been knighted, you see. He gave six lakhs to the war fund three years ago. It was talked about for months."

Apart from not wanting to go to parties at that time, my real reason for not wanting to go to Harilal's daughter's wedding was that I had never cared for Harilal. We had been at school together, and since our school days had met now and then because his father and mine were among the leading mill-owners in Sharanpur. But our similar backgrounds had done nothing to make us better friends. The now polished, urbane product of a British university had not succeeded in concealing the boy who had suffered from an inferiority complex because he had been darker than his schoolfellows.

A carefully nursed inferiority complex is like grief cherished for too long a time. It is embarrassing for other people. I, for one, have never known how to behave in its presence, and would far rather not be confronted by it. Harilal's complexion was the basis of his life-long struggle for recognition. Tormented in school by his lighter-skinned classmates—and I must have been one of them—he had never forgiven or forgotten their schoolboy jibes or been able to accept with good grace the fact that he had been born with a dark skin. Other boys were tormented for other reasons, for in school there is no escaping this form of torture, but, growing up, one forgets this and adjusts to the world, whatever one's handicaps and shortcomings. This Harilal had never been able to do. His colour had become a morbid preoccupation with him.

As a young man he had tried desperately to lighten it by using a series of creams and lotions. I remember coming across him one day at the chemist's when he was buying one such preparation; he had clumsily hidden it under his arm and talked of other things to overcome his confusion. I had felt sorry for him, but pity is not a climate in which friendship can flourish. Needless to say, none of his cures had succeeded.

He had argued with his parents, begging them not to send him to a university in England. The humiliation of his complexion in a white country would, he was sure, be too much to bear. His parents, however, had insisted that their wealth

be utilized to provide their only son with the best possible education.

Harilal had gone to England and, miraculously, new horizons had opened up before him. Those who had studied there with him were surprised at the change that came over him. In England he was just another Indian, and nobody cared whether he was a shade or two darker or lighter than the next Indian. What was more, he had money, and a great many avenues of enjoyment were open to him which many another student was not able to afford, whether British or Indian. He was open-handed with his money, and found himself popular and a "jolly good sport" in no time at all. He received invitations to the homes of his friends and met their families. He began to believe he had some worth as a human being, and on occasions, I am told, he even attempted a humorous remark or two about his colour. Speaking of a party he had attended in London, he once said with a good deal of forced heartiness: "I was the only blackie there, you know!"

In India, where taking a girl out had been out of the question, Harilal had never had this intoxicating experience. In England it was not only possible but, he realized after a while, simple. He soon became known to the headwaiters of some of London's smartest restaurants. He had his clothes tailored in Savile Row, and he escorted a succession of blondes to the theatre, to night clubs, and occasionally to a room in a discreet hotel located with a friend's help. How word of this got around I do not know; at any rate, his weakness for blondes was remarked upon by all his friends. I suppose it gave him a thrill to walk into an exclusive club or restaurant in the West End, a rather small, extremely dark man, escorting a fair young woman with hair like spun gold, and watch the curious eyes upon him. It must have pleased him to realize that the very girls who would have scorned the idea of meeting him socially in India were more than willing to enjoy his hospitality and be seen with him in public in

England. It must have occurred to him with considerable satisfaction that a well-filled wallet was sufficient allure despite a dark skin, and he must have decided then and there that his bank account must achieve for him the success he could grasp in no other way. Unquestionably it made him master of a situation. The waiter in a restaurant made deferential suggestions from an expensive, hand-written menu, and brought food and wine to the table with a flourish, and the girl opposite him was proud to wear the orchid he had selected for her. Once when he had been given a particularly good table at a crowded restaurant it had given him a thrill to hear the occupant of a neighbouring table whisper to his companion: "The fella must be a raja." He never tired of repeating the story.

Harilal had left England regretfully, compelled to do so because he had to go home and learn the business of running his father's textile mills. When he stepped ashore at Bombay his feelings of inferiority had not left him altogether, but they had been successfully coated with a veneer of *savoir-faire*. He was now a man of the world, heir to a textile fortune, and in a position to give other men jobs. These were facts that the colour of his complexion could not alter.

He had in his heart an abiding gratitude to the British for giving him confidence in himself. He was determined to repay this debt as flamboyantly as possible and at the earliest opportunity that came his way. The first evidence of this determination was the party his parents gave for him soon after his return. I was one of the few Indians present. Harilal had, in the short period after his return, managed to scrape acquaintance with nearly all the English families in Sharanpur, and they were all invited to his party. It was the pattern his life was to follow. His parents were surprised that he had not asked more of his old friends, but, not wanting to spoil his pleasure, they had not insisted that he include anyone he did not himself suggest.

There were, of course, many opportunities to repay what

he considered his debt, for in Sharanpur his work brought him into frequent contact with British business. His house, his whisky, and his car were offered freely to his business associates and their wives, yet, though he would not admit it, I am sure he had the uneasy sensation that they took his largesse for granted and did not regard it as generosity on his part, as his friends in England had. These were not, in fact, his friends—merely acquaintances whom he saw much more of than one normally sees of acquaintances. Their meetings took place either at his house or at theirs—never on the common ground of the Club, which was the centre of all social gaiety. He must have felt at times that there were insuperable barriers between himself and the British which would never be overcome on Indian soil. Conscious though he must have been of these barriers, he did not dream of allying himself socially with his own compatriots. He would say with earnestness that the British had a lot to teach us about club life.

It had soon become clear that some form of recognition by the British was what he craved, and it came his way when in 1942, at the Governor's plea to the business houses in Sharanpur for financial aid to the war fund, he made a donation of six lakhs and was knighted for this service to the Empire. Though I was not present at the occasion, and no one has ever told me so, I am convinced that tears must have glistened in his eyes at this overwhelming fulfilment of his dreams.

His struggles should have ended then, but they didn't. One did not get the impression that Harilal was a happy or a satisfied man. He still had no sense of belonging with the British, and by this time the Indians he knew had begun to look upon him as something of a joke. Some had begun calling him "the black Englishman." Of course he heard about this and decided he had even less use for them than before.

My cousin's wife informed me that a few months earlier he had achieved the further distinction of donating a large sum of money to the Sharanpur Club toward the building of

a swimming-pool that Indians would not be permitted to use. No doubt it pleased him to contribute to a cause that excluded them, even though it excluded him too.

The fact remains that, whatever his foibles, he was a generous man and could be depended upon to donate sums to most worthy causes. His knighthood seemed to have given an added spur to his charitable instincts. Sheela told me that a Sir Harilal Mathur Maternity Wing had recently been added to the Lady Mary Grenfield General Hospital and an additional Sir Harilal Mathur Labour Room built.

I was not at all sure my *khadi*-clad person would be welcome at his house, especially on an occasion when the Governor was to be present, but, having promised Sheela that I would go, I could not back out, and reluctantly went along. I did Harilal an injustice, however, when I doubted his welcome. Whatever his feelings may have been, he was charmingly hospitable, and we made our way to the enormous throng of guests on his lawn.

A rumba band throbbed its rhythm while champagne, sandwiches, and a variety of Indian sweets and delicacies were served to the guests. Sharanpur had not, I was told, seen such a vast social gathering for a long time. I understand it was given a full-page write-up in the *Illustrated Journal* later on. The ceremony itself was not due to begin till the Governor arrived, but meanwhile we ate and drank and watched the multi-coloured electric lights in the trees and hedges switch on. I did not know many people, and was glad to come across Sanad, champagne glass in hand, mouth stuffed with chicken sandwich, standing beside McIvor, who stood gloomily empty-handed: champagne was not his drink. I offered to find him some whisky, and, supplied with a glass of it, he became his usual sociable self.

"Are all Indian weddings as magnificent as this?" he enquired.

"More or less," I said, thinking the arrangements rather garish myself, but unable to explain that subtle difference

which distinguished magnificence from ostentation. What exactly would the difference be, I wondered. The number or arrangement of the lights? The quantity of food served?

"It has a kind of barbaric splendour," McIvor said.

Presently we were led into a salon where all the wedding presents were displayed in glittering rows upon long tables, each with the card of the sender attached. There were sets of jewellery and bolts of Benares brocade besides the inevitable gifts of silver and household items. Cheques made out to the bride were displayed on a Tanjore tray of bronze and silver. McIvor gasped at the amounts. I felt bound to explain to him that this was not a universal custom in India.

Harilal, who had left the receiving line to mingle with his guests, smilingly explained the coming ceremonies to his English friends until a servant came in to whisper of the "Lat Sahib's" arrival.

The *Illustrated Journal* account afterward described the red carpet laid out for Their Excellencies on the railway platform. Harilal could not arrange to carpet the route to his house, but he had had one laid from the portico where they would alight from their car to their front-row seats of honour for the wedding. As the Governor and his lady stepped from their car, flanked by an A.D.C., the rumba band stopped and, after a second of solemn silence, broke into "God Save the King." As the last majestic strains died away, four little girls, demure in pink silk saris, scattered rose petals along the carpet. I know perfectly well that Harilal did not walk backward, bowing all the way, as he ushered Their Excellencies to their seats, but somehow I am left with the stubborn impression that this is exactly what he did. Obviously, seeing is not always believing. Just before they reached their places, a bevy of Harilal's young female relations came up to perform *arati* around the guests of honour. Round and round before the distinguished faces flickered the flames of six or seven small lamps. The effect was very pretty. Afterward, duly garlanded, Their Excellencies were seated and the ceremony began.



Here, again, the evidence of my eyes was not always convincing. Several times while the photographers flashed their bulbs, it was a matter for some conjecture whether it was Their Excellencies who were getting married or Harilal's daughter. Harilal's attention was torn between the flowered arbour where his daughter was taking her vows and the cushioned chairs where the Governor and his lady reclined. His inner conflict was a strain on me, and I decided to slip away from the scene unnoticed. In the rows of cars outside Harilal's residence I could not possibly have located my cousin's car, and I welcomed the opportunity to walk home.

The moon was nearly full. Away from Harilal's electrically lit garden, it looked wise and mellow as it drifted placidly through the clouds. I felt absurdly exhilarated by the sight of it. From across the polo grounds came the joyous singing voice of a young man. I could see him on his bicycle flitting past the trees. I wondered what it felt like to sing on the street, to give full freedom to one's voice within the civilized confines of houses and public buildings. I decided to try, and then there was no stopping. Intoxicated, I sang all the way home.

McIvor had got into the habit of dropping in on me in the evening on his way home from his walk through the Botanical Gardens.

"Quite a wedding the other night," he remarked, after settling himself in the chair my servant brought from the verandah onto the lawn, and asking him to fetch some soda for the whisky he had brought. "But Harilal's wife scarcely looks old enough to have a daughter of twenty."

"It was his first wife's daughter who was married," I said.

"I didn't realize he'd lost his first wife."

"He hasn't. She's very much alive."

McIvor looked surprised. "But there's no divorce among the Hindus."

"They're not divorced," I replied. "Harilal happens to have two wives."

McIvor was taken aback.

"A Hindu can have as many wives as he likes," I pointed out, enjoying his consternation.

"Oh, I know that," he said. "But a man like Harilal . . . I've known him since I first came to Sharanpur . . . an educated man, been to Europe, studied at Oxford, and all that."

I smiled. "All that apparently didn't help his first wife to produce a son."

"Do you mean he put her aside simply because she didn't have a son? It's unbelievable of a man with Harilal's modern ways."

"But she hasn't been put aside," I said. "She's quite happy. As it happens, he married again with her consent."

"The whole situation is quite unbelievable," repeated McIvor. "How can you condone it?"

"It has nothing to do with me, and, in any case, why should one not condone a situation in which all the people concerned are quite happy?"

McIvor glanced at me keenly to see if I was joking. "You're not suggesting she's happy? She may have considered it her duty to stand aside for the new wife, but she couldn't have been pleased about it."

"I don't think it entered her head to be displeased," I replied. "She knew her husband wanted a son, and she knew she couldn't give him one. Possibly she couldn't have any more children after the first. She welcomed his new wife as a sister, and they live in the same house. It solves her problems in a way, too. She doesn't have to make public appearances with Harilal or entertain for him. For one thing, she doesn't speak a word of English, and, secondly, she knows nothing whatever about Western ways. An occasion like the other night with the Governor present would have floored her completely. She's much happier leaving all those duties to his second wife. They would only be distasteful to her."

"My God!" said McIvor.

"Harilal has his faults," I continued, "but he is a devoted husband."

"How the devil can he be devoted to two women?"

"It happens in the West, too, I understand."

"That's hardly the same thing. Only one woman can be your lawfully wedded wife. Nothing you do outside of your marriage can deprive your wife of her rights."

"If she has all the rights in the world and is unhappy over her husband's association with another woman, it can hardly be an improvement on Harilal's situation. I grant you," I went on, "it might in certain circumstances be an awkward and unpleasant state of affairs, but, as it happens, in this case it isn't."

"If I didn't know for a fact that you don't touch the stuff, I'd swear there was a drop of gin in that *nimboo-pani*," he said. "I've lived in India for nearly twenty years, and I'll never begin to understand it. You expect this kind of thing among the orthodox, but not from a man like Harilal."

"Never let the modern façade of any Indian deceive you," I said, greatly enjoying his bewilderment. "You never know what ancient custom may be lurking behind his modernity."

McIvor took this seriously. "I'm beginning to think you may be right. When a normal, healthy young fellow like Sanad talks about giving up his job, it makes one wonder whether there isn't a great deal one doesn't understand. I'm interested in the lad. He has promise. He'll do well if he doesn't convince himself he would be more useful elsewhere. I suppose basically that's his Hindu psychology at work."

"Sanad is young," I said, "and disturbed. That is why he talks of giving up things. But you're wrong if you think it has anything to do with Hinduism. Sacrifice has very little to do with our way of life."

"Really? I shouldn't have thought so. Indians—or, rather, you Hindus—seem very preoccupied with giving up things."

"We are and we aren't," I pointed out. "That is one of the

paradoxes you will find in India, probably the basic paradox. And when you examine it, it isn't really a paradox at all. I have always believed there are two opposite tendencies that create the pattern of Indian life: a forthright sensuality existing side by side with a stark and stoic renunciation. They seem poles apart, but they are really two sides of the same coin. At heart the sensualist is as Indian as the ascetic. The difference between the two is usually a matter of time. It is ingrained in us from an early age that there is a time for everything and everything is right in its own time. Even if the sensual temperament does not gradually lean toward asceticism, it will, at any rate, always regard the ascetic as the ideal of a fulfilled old age."

McIvor stared down into his glass of whisky and thought about this for a while. "I don't agree with you," he decided, "about Hindus being sensualists."

"Come, now," I laughed. "You have only to look at our temple sculpture to realize that. It is robust enough evidence of our fundamental *joie de vivre*."

"I don't consider that sufficient evidence of the Hindu mind today," he replied, "any more than the ancient and modern Greeks are the same people."

"All right, take the business community here in Sharanpur. Where can you find a more impressive collection of potbellies and bank balances? If you think any one of our illustrious money-makers here is concerned about his immortal soul, you are mistaken. That is, not one of them is concerned about it at present, but hardly a single one will be unconcerned about it as he grows older. As I told you earlier, there is a time for everything—a time for making money and enjoying the good things of life, and a time for renouncing them. Have you ever seen a funeral procession?"

"Dozens, I suppose."

"Have you noticed that often it is accompanied by a good deal of music and dancing, and that the bier is decorated with coloured cloth and flowers?"

"Now you mention it, there usually is an infernal racket going on."

"Well, the infernal racket goes on only if the dead man has led a full life."

"You mean a good life, surely?"

"Not necessarily a good life," I corrected, "but a full life. That is, if he has lived to the best of his ability and the limit of his personality in the position destiny has seen fit to place him. Who cares whether he has been good or bad? The point is, has he enjoyed himself thoroughly and given the best of himself to his role?"

"Remarkable," was McIvor's comment. "Yet you people believe in *karma*. Isn't that a fatalistic approach to life? Doesn't it mean a complete acceptance of your condition? That's exactly the reverse of getting the most out of life."

"You are wrong," I said. "*Karma* merely means living your life and doing your duty to the best of your ability in whichever capacity you happen to have been born in. True, your present condition is the result of your past life and actions, but then it is equally true that what you do in this life will create the conditions for your next one. In other words, it rests wholly with you to better your status. There was never a more challenging philosophy. The difference between your belief and mine is that you see life in terms of time, a limited span allotted to every man in which he must accomplish all he can before he dies. We see it in terms of eternity, with infinite time ahead for every human being to make a better creature of himself."

"That," said McIvor, "is what I would still call acceptance, but a majestic acceptance of destiny."

"The majesty makes all the difference, does it not?" I insisted.

"Hmph," said McIvor. "You Indians can certainly talk the hind leg off the devil."

I laughed. "That's why we eventually have to think of re-

nouncing the world. There is so much talk and pandemonium around us all our days that, unless we retreated from it for a little while at least in our old age, we would surely die lunatics!"

"But, seriously," he said, "don't you believe Indians are more religious than, for example, we Europeans?"

He had, he said, gone to church every Sunday of his childhood, and had heard a great deal from a snow-haired, organ-voiced preacher about the wrath of God. Every thunderstorm and flash of lightning during his tender years had heralded that wrath in his imagination, and in a country where storms were not infrequent he had been led to the apprehensive conclusion that wrath hung upon the air, waiting to descend. Yet none of this had represented religion to him, and neither then nor at any time since had he considered himself a religious man. It was different in India, where religion seemed to be the reason for nearly everything that happened.

"I would not say we are more religious than other people," I told him, "but we are certainly more preoccupied with religion. That's not the same thing, you see. Religion, for us, is inseparable from our daily life. A Hindu has no church as such—the temple is not to him what your church is to you, or the mosque to a Muslim. It is a place where he may go if he wants to worship there, but he can live without setting foot there and still remain a perfectly good, practising Hindu. The various names of God are freely given to boys among us: Bhagvan, Narayan, Ishvara. There is no commandment that the name of God must not be mentioned in vain. In fact, we are commanded to mention it, to repeat it over and over again like a blessing. For many a Hindu, prayer is no more than the fervent repetition of God's name. 'Rām, Rām, Rām,' he goes on saying, and some of our great sages have attained mystic heights by concentration on this single idea. In this part of the country, you may have noticed, 'Rām Rām' is also a form of greeting."

It had grown dark as we sat there, and the trees of the park were shadowy silhouettes.

"And all this began with Harilal's two wives," said McIvor, shaking his head. "That beats everything."

"A garden is a wonderful place to talk," I said. "Have you noticed? One goes smoothly along, unhampered, from topic to topic. It is never quite the same in a room."

"If you're trying to tell me you talk less in a room, you can keep that idea to yourself," he said.

After McIvor had left and I had gone indoors, eaten my dinner, and locked the front door for the night, Sanad arrived, hammering enthusiastically on it. I thought he would crack the glass. I let him in, and he demanded dinner, saying he was famished.

"I've eaten long ago," I told him, "and there's only some vegetable left. I can get *chapattis* made."

Sanad groaned. He looked enormous in my small drawing-room. "Don't lock me out," he said. "I'm going to get some food."

"Get it and eat it in your own rooms, then," I told him, determined to be inhospitable. "I'm sleepy."

"I wouldn't deprive you of my company for anything," he replied cheerfully. "Remember to leave the front door open."

He came back half an hour later with layers of thick *chapattis* and some dozen *kababs* wrapped in a sheet of newspaper, and proceeded to devour them at an alarming rate.

"Well," he said when he had finished, "what I came to see you about was that girl's address. I thought I ought to go and apologize to her for being rude that night."

As several weeks had gone by since that night, I wondered at his anxiety to apologize.

"What, in Hindi?" I mocked.

He grinned. "Since she's so particular, I thought you might come along as interpreter."

Here, I thought, was a situation Rohan Masi would have relished.

"And in the meantime," Sanad said, settling himself on my *takht* with every intention of staying for several hours, "you might tell me her name and something about her."

"If your manners tonight are any indication of the way you propose to behave in her presence," I said, "your apology will not even be heard, let alone accepted."

Sanad raised himself menacingly. "Are you, a *bania* of Sharanpur, going to teach me, an aristocrat of Lucknow, about manners?"

I decided not to argue the point.



## ❧ Part Two ❧

### CHAPTER I

❧ THE FIRST time I saw Kusum she was sitting under a neem tree patting wet mud into ball shapes. The mud clung to her bare feet and her clothes, and there was a daub of it on her chin. She must have been six or seven years old at the time.

"I'm making *luddoos*," she informed me, "for Dussehra."

I did not notice Kusum much in those early days. One does not notice one particular child in a houseful of children, especially when the children are not seen often in the house. The Sahai children lived as far as I could tell, out of doors—in their own rambling, untidy garden and in the open fields beyond. There was one woman, Jumna, to look after them all, and their mother, Savitri, supervised their upbringing with that mixture of care and unconcern which typifies the mother of a large family. The results, to the casual observer, were delightful. The children were neither too well cared for nor too wild. There was about them the same gypsy abandon that characterized their garden. Compared with the carefully clipped hedges and beautiful flower-beds of Govind Narayan's garden with its exquisite, expensive blooms im-

ported from Europe, the Sahais' was a tangle of colour that had sprung up in obedience to no particular design. The spear-like grass thrust up too tall in spots, because the single *mali* they employed could not control its rapid growth, while in other places it was scraggy and sparse. There was a faded, grassless patch below the big painted swing where the children's bare feet had scraped the earth countless times. More often than not there were toys and articles of clothing and perhaps an odd shoe left around for Jumna to pick up long after they had gone to bed.

No flower of that garden could have been exhibited at Sharanpur's annual flower show, but it had charm and an untrammelled freshness, just as Govind Narayan's decorative setting breathed a whispered hint of exotic decay. Perhaps because of this difference in their settings, I had never introduced the two families to each other or even taken Sanad to the Sahais' after he was posted to Sharanpur.

Madan and Savitri Sahai were unpretentious people, the sort of whom the world must be largely made. They were simple, ordinary folk, creating that atmosphere of harmony in their daily lives which only unremarkable, unheroic people can create; there is too much turmoil about the heroic. They had lived in Sharanpur all their lives, and Madan taught Indian history at Sharanpur College.

"Don't you want to watch the Dussehra procession?" Kusum asked me. "Come with us and watch it from the garden wall when my brothers come home."

When the boys returned from school, I went with the five of them to the edge of the garden and we sat on the wall, dangling our legs—all except Kusum, who sat on Sahdev's shoulders.

"Sec, pigeon," he said as the procession came by, "there are Sri Rama and Lakshman with their bows and arrows, and Sita stands beside them. They are returning from their jungle exile."

The actors who took the leading roles sat stiffly in their

places, but around them the people seethed, suddenly filling the road with the beating of drums and the shouting of "*Sri Rama Chandra ki jai!*" as though that scene of several thousand years ago was in truth come to life again.

"Why is Rama blue?" Kusum wondered, because the man and woman who took the parts of Lakshman and Sita in the tableau were their own natural colour, while Rama was smeared with blue paint.

"Because he is known as the sky-coloured one," said Sahdev.

We raised dazzled eyes to the hot blue sky above us and quickly averted our glances from the shimmering haze. It was a beautiful colour in a glorious October day despite the heat. Behind us lay the house, weather-worn and friendly, its back verandah littered with the children's playthings. In front, beyond the road where the procession wended its way, stretched acres of waving wheat, and far in the distance rose the sun-baked walls of village huts surrounded by carefully watered fields of sugar-cane. In three weeks the year would sink into the past, and Divali would bring cooler days dissolving into swifter darkness.

"When you go into exile, Bhaiya," said Kusum, "I shall go with you, and then we shall ride back together in a procession too."

The younger boys hooted their laughter, but Sahdev smiled, encircling Kusum in a small secret world they alone seemed to share.

Naresh scraped orange dust from the wall with his bare toes and said: "Let's go and buy some sugar-cane. Is anyone coming?"

As I hesitated between the prospect of sugar-cane and returning to the house to await Madan Sahai's arrival, Jumna's voice carried harshly across the garden.

"Kusum! Come, child, it is time for your milk."

Grumbling, the ayah made her way toward us.

"Rām, Rām." She shook her head in despair. "Is this the

age to be carried on a man's shoulders, albeit he is your brother? Put her down, Sahdev Sahib," she commanded, "and do not, I pray you, drag her into the sun. Who will marry the girl? Her skin is nearing the colour of mine."

Jumna informed us that she had been betrothed at birth and married at seven, though she had not gone to her husband's home for another five years. I gathered that the children heard this recital of her personal history fairly regularly. She considered Kusum of marriageable age, and she looked at the brown-skinned child before her in dismay, though the sight of the four disreputable young tramps did not upset her. A man, be he seven or seventy, must go his own way and live his own life.

"Don't despair, Jumna," Sahdev teased, setting his sister on the ground. "You got married, didn't you, in spite of your skin? And your husband finds you pleasing, doesn't he? Though why he should we shall never know."

Jumna scowled to hide her embarrassment, drawing the end of her sari farther forward on her head. "It does not become you, sahib, to speak so to a woman," she scolded. "And what is good enough for a peasant woman born in a field is surely not good enough for the little mistress."

"You are right," said Sahdev, fondling Kusum's hair. "My little pigeon must have the handsomest, noblest bridegroom. Nothing less will do."

Kusum shook her head firmly. "I'm not going to marry at all," she said with an air of defiance which distressed Jumna more than all her adventures in the sun. "Bhaiya and I shall be together always, and when I grow up I shall look after him."

"*Achchā*, let the future take its course. Now come and drink your milk. Bibiji waits for you on the verandah."

Kusum threw Sahdev a pleading glance, and Karan, seeing it, decided: "I think I'll go and buy some sugar-cane."

Naresh and Kumar tumbled after him on to the road below, and they raced toward the sugar-cane shop. The shop-

keeper did a brisk business in those hot, dry October days. It was Dussehra, and every passer-by in new clothes, fresh from his bath in the Ganges, his forehead streaked with *tika*, was willing to lavish a few coppers on a glass of the delicious syrup. Some took the entire cane, biting it off vigorously, chewing the pieces dry, and leaving dried bits to bleach along the roadside.

"Which story would my pigeon like to hear while she drinks her milk?" asked Sahdev, taking Kusum's hand as we set off toward the house.

"It is the Ramayana and the Mahabharata put together you will need to make this child eat her meals and drink her milk properly," said Jumna with a grunt.

And the professor, their father, said the same thing in his own words when he came back from the college and heard noises from the back verandah.

"Savitri, what is the commotion from the back?"

"Just Kusum drinking her milk," his wife explained, going out to meet him.

"God help us! Can the child not drink her milk without six people performing a *tamasha* for her?"

"It is not six people. It is Sahdev enacting six different parts."

"You surprise me, all of you," said Madan Sahai, "especially Sahdev, indulging the child in this manner. Do you think this could go on in any other part of the world? People simply haven't the time."

Madan had been to Europe on a scholarship during his student days, and had been an admirer since then of all that Western efficiency had been able to accomplish.

"What a pity," murmured Savitri. "What, then, do they do with their time?"

"A hundred other things," he said impatiently. "They have hobbies, they join clubs—"

"Clubs?" Savitri asked incredulously. "Hobbies?"

Madan looked to me for support, but I could offer none.

My own childhood has been full of similar *tamashas* to make me eat and drink. Servants had sung and danced for me, my mother had told me stories, and each mealtime had become a minor theatrical production. I suppose I had been spoiled, but it was the only upbringing I knew, and it had been a happy one. Recalling my own horror of my daily glass of buffalo milk with its heavily wrinkled layers of cream, I sympathized with Kusum's desire to be entertained during her unpleasant ordeal. I learned later that Madan, too, in spite of his criticism, shrugged off his disapproval. He felt it his duty to protest every now and then, but he did no more than this. Whatever might happen in any other part of the world, this was India, and India, for Madan, was his life. Country, goddess, mother—he accepted even all that was wrong in her. To his way of thinking, it would set itself right in the course of history.

And Sahdev continued to indulge Kusum. Whenever he could, he fetched her home from school, seating her on a cushion on the bar of his bicycle, and stopping in the bazaar to buy her a stick of spun-sugar candy or a coloured wooden toy. It was Sahdev who mended her broken dolls, washed her cuts and bruises when she fell, helped her with her lessons, and sang her songs and told her stories at mealtime.

"Sing the one you sang this morning," she would say.

"No, pigeon, the song of the morning must only be sung in the morning. The evening song has another *rāg*. And wait till the rains begin. *Sāvan* has its own lovely songs, so many of them, and I shall teach them to you."

"Why not now?" Kusum urged.

"Because now is not the time. The tune will only be right when the grass is tall again, the air clean, and the earth sweet-smelling with rain. You would not sing a wedding song at a funeral, would you?"

Kusum shook her head.

"So you must not sing an evening song in the morning or a *Sāvan* song before it rains."

"And if I do, what will happen?"

I think she rather hoped that thunder would peal or nature give some other indication of wrath. But Sahdev only laughed.

"Nothing will happen, only it will be in discord with the season."

So Sahdev explained the pattern of days and nights whose quintessence could be sensitively enjoyed only by those who lived in harmony with the seasons. And what Sahdev translated into poetic terms, Savitri realized in her domestic sphere. There was a time for everything—seasons for eating lightly and seasons for eating well—and intertwined between them were the days for fasting. Though her family did not join her in her fasts, Savitri observed them regularly, just as she rose at five each morning to do her *puja*, year in and year out. She reminded me of my own mother in this respect, and Mother sometimes sent her flowers from our garden for her *puja*.

I always remember Savitri as she looked one morning when we found her in her garden plucking flowers for her worship. To please my mother, I had gone with her to have an early dip in the Ganges. On our way home we stopped at the Sahais', and, as the household was asleep, we went straight into the garden, knowing we would find Savitri there. It was the hour of sunrise, and it held all the glistening perfection of a raindrop before it falls to the ground. Savitri, fresh from her bath, had the scent of sandalwood about her. In her crisp cotton sari, her long hair falling in deep waves down her back, she looked part of the dawn. Beside her stood Kusum, tousle-haired and bare-footed, her fingers competing with her mother's to fill the basket. Kusum could not resist burying her nose in the flowers, and Savitri scolded her: "Don't smell the flowers, child. Would you offer to God food you had already tasted? It would no longer be pure."

Savitri in her calm perfection was, to Kusum, a fascinating creature—one whom she admired but could not always un-

derstand. Jumna of the rasping voice and the horny hands was more real, and it was to Jumna she went for explanations.

"Jumna, why does Mama fast?"

Jumna, who was pounding the wash rhythmically on a broad flat stone under a tap in the back garden, looked up, as I did from the newspaper I was reading, wondering how she would explain the complicated reasons for religious fasts.

"To remind herself that she rules her body and is not ruled by it," she said briefly. "It is a thing the too-well-fed would do well to remember."

I had discovered that Jumna was a woman of few words, but the ones she chose were pithy. I was sure she was thinking of the *bania* who sold her wheat and rice, and who seemed to add every anna of what she referred to as his "ill-begotten profit" to his expanding girth.

"You can either worship your stomach or worship God," added Jumna succinctly. "It is not in human nature to do both."

"Oh," said Kusum, entranced by the profundity of this. She turned to me. "Which do you worship?"

"Kusum, little one," I told her, "Jumna is a wise woman, but she has forgotten to tell you one thing. If men went about fasting and worshipping, what would happen to the affairs of the world? Religious observances are for *sanyasis* and women. God would be very displeased if I denied my stomach."

There was always plenty to eat at the Sahais', but one left the table feeling light, a thing that was not possible at Govind Narayan's. Savitri was a firm believer in the fruits and vegetables of the season, in "heating" foods during the cold weather and "cooling" foods during the hot weather. Meat, of course, was a "heating" food, and she would no more have eaten meat on a hot day than she would have wrapped about her the Kashmir shawl she kept for the winter. The children seemed to thrive on the diet she gave them, though none of



them had ever been fat. Savitri once told me of an amusing incident in connection with this.

She and the children had gone to visit relatives in another city. Their compartment on the train was shared by a neighbourly lady and her three youngsters. She eyed Savitri's brood pityingly.

"Why are your children so weak, sister?" she asked in genuine concern.

They were facing a long journey together and how could this be done in silence when they must eat, sleep, dress, and undress in one small, confined space, and perhaps make room for passengers who would crowd in at other stations?

Savitri was tempted to reply that if her children were any stronger or more active, she herself would need a doctor's care, but she smiled and murmured a noncommittal reply.

The lady proceeded to advise her on the upbringing of children, pointing out with pride her own plump offspring, who sat sulky and unmoving in a corner of the berth. "You did not feed yourself properly when you were expecting them," she concluded. "I ate well of milk and *ghee* and plenty of cream, and daily I drank an ounce of almond oil. Oh, the difficulty I had in moving about in those days, but look at the result!"

Savitri congratulated her travelling companion on these exemplary feats and offered up silent prayers of gratitude for her own bright-eyed children and supple figure.

"Tender young coconut," the lady went on. "That's what you should have eaten to make them fair. I had it every morning for the first few months of every pregnancy."

"I shall remember that," Savitri promised her

Sahdev was devoted to his young sister. Even before she learned to walk they were inseparable. Savitri told me he had carried her about on his hip, to the *maidan* where his friends met to roll hoops and fly kites or play marbles, and to the shops when he ran errands for his mother. Madan had pro-

tested in vain: "The child will never learn to use her legs. And she should not be carried about in the heat and dust." But Savitri, after her first misgivings, had had no qualms for Kusum's safety. She had had the intimate daily experience of her sons' upbringing. She knew that the sun, a flurry of dust, the wrong food eaten at the wrong time, could not do a child much harm.

"Not a child bred in this climate," she had told her husband. "Of course, perhaps in Europe it is different. . . ."

And with a smile he had let her have her way.

"Why do you suppose I give in to her so much?" he asked me once.

"Because she is usually right," I replied.

"Or because your learning is from books and mine from everything I see around me," she told him. "Even India is for you a history book or an ancient monument or a bit of sculpture. For me it is Sahdev, and Naresh, and Karan, and Kumar, and Kusum."

The three younger boys were still children absorbed, child-like, in their games, but Sahdev possessed a maturity far beyond his years, and Savitri was convinced that he was a fit guardian for Kusum.

It was obvious that he was more to her than this. The devotion between them was touching, a thing to make a passer-by smile indulgently and go on his way lighter-spirited than before. Sahdev had a story for every mood and a song for every season.

"Some day, Mā-ji," he often told his mother, "I shall be a composer of songs like Surdas."

Sahdev did not wait for that far-distant day to compose his poems. He wrote them walking to and from school, watching the pageant of the countryside and the life of the folk whose home it had been for sun-beaten centuries. He could watch it best from his own garden wall, a favourite place with him, and he never grew tired of the changing scene before him. The plain beyond the wall varied from season to sea-

son. Until the monsoon restored it to life, it stretched dry and desolate with only the dhak trees bursting into scarlet flowers to relieve its dusty monotony. The rains came, gentle at first, but gathering violence and tempo as their slanting fury struck the thirsty fields. Gradually the storm spent itself, revealing a sea of billowing grasses, part of the lush green mantle that clothed the entire countryside.

Then there were the processions that went by, an endless stream of them. There were the religious ones, with their huge images of wood or cardboard or stone, bringing gods, goddesses, and demons to earth in all their fierce splendour. There were the wedding processions, with the bridegroom riding a prancing horse at the head of his party to fetch his bride from her father's house. Behind him a brass band jangled in shrieking discord, shattering the peace of the neighbourhood, and the little boys and girls of the *bārāt* party danced in gay abandon along the road, joined on the way by an eager swarm of urchins and stray curs, all celebrating a joyful event in the life of a stranger. The road belonged to them all alike, the well and the poorly dressed, the bridegroom and the vagabond. There were the processions of bullock carts bringing produce from the villages, and on festival days the villagers came with cows washed clean and silky, their horns painted in glistening colours and mounted with jingling silver trinkets. Bright-bannered, gaudy, clanging with music, raising swirls of dust and a confusion of barking dogs, the processions filled the road with their caravan of noise and colour. Sahdev managed to capture this spirit in his short, lyrical poems, and once I teased him about their remoteness from troubled reality. Did he really think life for the villager was as idyllic as he portrayed it?

"Isn't the idyllic part what matters?" he asked me.

He could see as clearly as the most matter-of-fact observer that the village folk suffered when their land suffered, that their children were emaciated, their women overburdened with child-bearing. But there was a spark that had kept them

going, and it was the spark that lit his imagination. What counted, he said, was the harvesting of the crops, not the famines—the small oases of village communities, not the arid land around them—and the glow of a crackling fire beneath a peepal tree where the villagers gathered of an evening to listen to a wandering story-teller. What mattered, he told me, was that all this should be recounted in their own inimitable dialect, the rough-sweet dialect that had the enduring goodness of stone-ground whole-wheat flour, the language immortalized by Surdas and the poets of old.

“It was different for Surdas,” I argued. “He wrote about Sri Krishna. Who would not wax lyrical over such a life?”

The mischievous child Krishna had played a thousand pranks on the community of cowherds in which he had been reared. He had roamed the woods of Brindaban playing on his bamboo flute while his father’s cows grazed in the pastures, and he had grown up so beautiful in his youth and strength that no mortal had been able to resist his charm. Lord Krishna had been God, the most beloved incarnation of them all. His very memory was enchantment still. Worship of him was lover-like rather than reverence for a deity. To this day artists and craftsmen carved his image in a hundred different postures in silver and ivory, sandalwood and stone. To write of him must of course have brought out all that was romantic in a poet’s imagination.

“Is what we see about us today less exciting?” Sahdev challenged. “Have you ever been to a story-telling, or heard the Ramayana read aloud and acted out under the trees? It might have happened yesterday, it is so real for the people who watch. Have you ever noticed their expressions?”

I had noticed them. What I had wanted to find out was whether Sahdev had noticed them. Listening to him, looking at him, I knew that he had chanced upon the secret of Bharat Mata. He had discovered her magic and would be bound fast by it all his days. It was a magic that sprang from roots buried deep in mysterious recesses, and there was no explaining

its hold. He would grow up and find much in her to criticize and alter, much that might one day shame him, but he would never deny her. He would continue to respond to her with a throbbing awareness: with delight in all her loveliness, and with tenderness toward her misery rather than revulsion from it. I knew that for Sahdev nothing would ever compare with the joy, and at times the incomparable agony, of belonging to her. Bharat Mata would be both inspiration and torment to him, responsible ultimately for the person he became, the precious essence he alone would embody, distinct from all other human beings.

## CHAPTER II

☛ I DON'T think I would be wrong in saying that those of us who were aware of the happenings in India during the pre-Independence decade lived either in the past or in the future. The present had only the kind of dim reality which exists in a theatre before the curtain rises for the next scene of a performance. Briefly the room hums with talk and one notices the audience gathered round, but the mind is not on the stir or the comments of the moment. For some of us, and Madan Sahai was among these, the past was of consuming interest, while for others, like myself, it was the coming scenes that mattered; though we differed in this respect, we shared a common disregard for the unpleasantness of the present.

Madan Sahai belonged in the former category by virtue of the fact that he taught Indian history and all his waking hours were spent in making the past alive and meaningful to his students. History had a fascination for him which I could not understand then and have never since been able to appreciate. I had been brought up in a family of business folk, and, besides having left Sharanpur College without having acquired a degree, I was always more favourably inclined to people than to books, to the living rather than the dead. I felt a far greater pride in the sight of progress made in some small village than in the story, however inspiring, of India's past culture and achievements. To me every step forward was a step toward a less hungry, less ragged India. My dreams were of the future, Madan's were of the past. Anything that obscured a clearer view of history was Madan's enemy, and the examinations were the worst offenders. In all the years he

had taught, he had not reconciled himself to the narrowness of outlook they imposed.

"The examination is the main hurdle. The degree is the goal, and nothing else seems to matter," he said tiredly, running his hands through his hair. "Not that I blame the students. There are a few whose futures don't depend on their marks, but the others will get nowhere without a first division."

"What will they get *with* a first division?" I countered. "A clerkship in an office?"

Madan's eyes burned into mine. "It is, at least, a job. In spite of all the welfare work you do, this is one thing you can never really understand. You've always had the tremendous advantage of knowing where your next meal was coming from. Oh, yes, I know you've given up your inheritance, and it was considerable, but you have enough for your needs and you always will have."

"It is the reason why I have been able to live as I pleased without being obliged to anyone. I don't consider poverty or austerity virtues in themselves," I told him.

"Only a fool considers them virtues at all," he said abruptly.

There were some days, he said, when he sensed a response from among the students. He saw it in their expressions and their alert postures. He felt that they listened with all their faculties. Then his lecture changed its course, overstepping its prescribed limits, and swelled and soared beyond the immediate urgency of marks and examinations. The past, always a living, dynamic thing, rose to meet him, and on these occasions he could pierce the dry barrier of facts and make his students, too, see something of the grandeur that lay beyond.

He once had this sort of spell during a lecture on Ashoka. I was to meet him for lunch that day, and went into his class to await him. Madan, who had entered the room neat and professorial, was another man before his lecture was over.

I can see him now, his thin face intent, his eyes unseeing, his nervous hands flexed against the table's edge. I remember thinking that he did not look quite himself and then realizing that the real Madan was now in the realm of Ashoka the Great, oblivious to his immediate surroundings.

Ashoka, the history books said, had renounced war as a policy, become a Buddhist, and devoted himself to spreading the message of the Buddha. It was all I could remember about the Emperor from my student days.

"But think," Madan urged, "think what such a renunciation would have meant at any time in history. Think, particularly, what it meant in the third century before Christ, when might ruled right and war was the sport of kings. Try to imagine the state of mind that inspired the impassioned edicts engraved on rocks and pillars all over this country, and the enthusiasm that accomplished a marvel of engineering in transporting those giant pillars to its far corners. Try to grasp what the word of the Buddha meant, not only to India, but to neighbouring countries where Ashoka sent emissaries and missionaries, and where it dominated life and thought for the next thousand years."

The sun had shifted upward in the sky while Madan spoke, and the classroom was suddenly in shadow. I felt strangely elated, as though what I had imagined was a pinpoint of light had turned out to be a column of fire. In its presence, what mattered now was of little importance.

"Religions," Madan went on, and his voice, never loud, was lower and more distinct, "have dominated hemispheres since then, but none so early as Buddhism and none so absolutely dedicated to peace. No war, no crusade has ever been fought in its name, no land claimed, no blood shed, no life maimed. In Ashoka's time it saturated the ancient world within its reach with sanity and stability."

Madan's transports were occasionally remarked upon by the college authorities.

"Don't lose sight of the course, Dr. Sahai. You realize the



time element is important. The examinations are approaching. . . .”

“I understand. I am merely trying to instil a little enthusiasm into the students. They have such a listless approach. If they could be taken behind the facts and the dates . . .”

“The student body needs no urging toward enthusiasm, Dr. Sahai. I find it needs constant curbing. A little more discipline would not be out of place.”

“I understand.”

“And Dr. Sahai, er—I don’t think the importance of facts and dates should be underestimated. A certain amount of interpretation may be necessary, of course, but we must not lose sight of the course—in the interests of the students themselves.”

“I quite understand.”

Madan repeated the conversation to me.

“Paint that donkey, Dr. Sahai,” he mimicked, “but leave off the flesh and blood. Confine yourself to the bones, just the bones.”

We laughed heartily over it, but for the most part Madan tried to confine himself to the textbook course as he had been advised. For all his flights of rhetoric, he was a practical man. He had a job to maintain and a family to support. He curbed his zeal, but not only from necessity. Beneath that practical streak there lay a core of invincible faith in the inevitable processes of history. Not now perhaps, but not long from now—not in his own time, but at some time in the future—there would be no such warning to obstruct the lessons of history. This *kalyug*—this age of darkness—would pass as every age passed. There was no halting the inexorable tide. In its own time it would sweep away the cobwebs.

Then came the ’42 disturbances, and Madan’s faith in history was put to a severe test. It may be possible to sustain a belief in its academic purity when one is alone, but not when there are others to consider. Madan had to consider his sons, who, in their youth and impatience, had a different

view of history, one that would not wait for time to pass. Time in itself was empty, they believed. It was effort that gave it meaning. Watching the struggle between father and sons, I often wanted to cry out: "Where are you, Bharat Mata, what are you, that we would all live and die for you after our separate fashions? What is it that you ask of us, and how can we truly serve you?"

I was in Sharanpur for a few days during that troubled time, and I watched their battle come to its climax. It was a day on which all the boys had joined a procession to protest the arrest of Gandhi. They had been out of the house all day, coming home late in the evening, tired, dishevelled, and excited. Madan was visibly shaken.

"Listen to me," he pleaded with his sons. "This is not the time to become involved in political matters. You will never again have the chance to complete your education. It is madness to put yourselves in danger. Suppose there is shooting."

He turned to me. "It is I who must be mad, pleading with them, mere children, when I ought to be able to control them. They should be obeying, not defying me."

I felt for him deeply, yet I could not help seeing that, in a way quite unlike Govind Narayan's, Madan too was so immersed in the past that he could not face the present squarely.

"Madan," I said, "do you really think we still live in those far-off times when the student was an apprentice of his *guru* and dedicated to his service for a given span of his life?"

He looked at me as though I had betrayed his friendship. "You have no sons. You do not understand."

He turned to Sahdev. "I once felt as you do, Sahdev, but, don't you see, if you wish to serve India, you must think ahead. You are much too young to remember some of the indignities I have experienced in this very town, but I have survived them, and by ignoring them I think I have served my country better."

Sahdev was obstinate. "An education is a useful thing, Papaji, but it is not sacred, not at a time like this."

"Well," said Madan, distracted, "what do you propose to do?"

"There is no fixed programme. We shall march in processions, and we shall picket the foreign shops—"

"And risk arrest," interrupted his father.

"We shall not be the only ones," came the cool reply. "In any case, Papaji, only Naresh and I will be liable to arrest. The others are under eighteen."

"Do you realize," Madan said in a final attempt to convert his son, "the anxiety you are imposing on your mother and me by insisting on taking part in these activities?"

At mention of his mother, Sahdev softened. If she speaks one word now, I thought, if she makes the slightest gesture of displeasure, he will obey her. But Savitri had not spoken all this time, nor did she now. The opportunity came and went. She kept quiet, and, though she did not actually side with her children, they rightly interpreted her silence as acquiescence. They understood the nuances of all her silences, the ones of approval and the ones of disapproval, the loving and the condemning ones. Her disciplining of them had consisted of her glances alone, and they knew the meaning of each one.

"I am sincerely sorry, Papaji," Sahdev said, and the argument was ended.

Savitri rose from her chair on the verandah and walked out into the garden toward the low brick wall where her children so often sat. I followed her, and we sat down on the wall together, I waiting for her to speak.

"You are wondering," she said, "why I did not stop him."

"Why did you not?" I asked.

"Sahdev is not a child, nor does he act on impulse. He is the most thoughtful of my sons. I respect his judgement."

"And you yourself? How do you feel about this crisis?"

Her profile looked serene against the amber evening sky.

"It does not touch me," she replied, and I believed her.

"How do you manage to isolate yourself from it so completely?" I asked humbly. The rest of us were disturbed, or unhappy, or agitated.

"I do not isolate myself. It is the ones who rule us who isolate themselves, who have never tried to understand. It is they who are cut off and alone."

I waited for her to go on.

"They have taken our land," she said. "Our roads are named after their people. The greenest grass is reserved for them and the most rewarding jobs. But they have not penetrated the inner sanctum, the real temple that is India. In that they have no interest, for it does not profit them. The realm of the spirit continues inviolate, soaring above the crushed hopes and the unborn dreams. That still belongs to Bharat Mata alone, and no one can deprive her of it."

"Is that enough for you?"

"For me, yes. For the young people it cannot be enough. It would be useless to expect it."

"So they have your permission to take part in the battle?"

"They have my prayers, since I cannot stop them." She smiled. "But there is one great consolation. Though they must fight, they will fight peacefully. There will be no bloodshed. The Mahatma, when he preached non-violence, understood many things, but the greatest of these was his understanding of a mother's heart."

She was right. In the days that followed, there were isolated acts of violence among the students, but Sahdev kept his brothers from indulging in them, and for the most part the rebellion was peaceful. They argued with him fiercely, but in the end his will prevailed. There was something compelling about his voice, and they obeyed his authority where they would have defied their father's. Between Savitri and Sahdev there grew an even closer bond in those days. She supported him in her prayers in whatever he did. Savitri was

not a demonstrative woman. She had never fondled or kissed her children excessively, but her love for Sahdev shone in her eyes, and she was filled with pride in him. He never left the house without her blessing, and he sought her out before anyone else on his return.

"Ma-ji," he would say to her, "I am hungry" or "I am tired." And nothing would give her greater pleasure than to wait on him. She would fetch a *thal* of hot food from the kitchen herself, and Jumna would be sent for to wash his feet and press them. Sahdev was embarrassed by these attentions, but he did not like to hurt his mother's feelings by refusing them. He would tell her the events of the day, marveling at how much she instinctively grasped of the things that were beyond the range of her own experience. Very much as his father had done, he would turn to me and say: "Isn't it strange how she understands everything?"

Madan was upset by his sons' behaviour, but more so by the unnatural torpor that seemed to settle over the town.

"The days are without incident," he said, "as the days of an invalid are without incident. The whole town is sick."

"It has been like this before," I reminded him. "Don't you remember, in '22, when Gandhi was first arrested and condemned to six years' imprisonment?"

A half-forgotten memory stirred, and I remembered a tune that people had been singing at that time, the labourers, the *tongawallas*, and travelling vendors. I hummed snatches of it softly, and Madan recalled it too. It had been composed in Gandhi's native Gujerat just after his arrest, a song whose tragic refrain had floated over India, bringing quick tears to the eyes of those who heard it. No one knew who had composed it. There had been just a few lines in peasant dialect, sung first of all, it was said, by a solitary villager walking his cows home at sundown. But its haunting melody, escaping from one heavy heart, had winged its way across the fields

and villages of Gujerat and then over the entire country until we were all singing it and sorrowing.

"Yes, it was like this before," Madan admitted, "but it seems worse now. Is it because I am older and haven't as much time to look ahead as I did then?"

Madan's equilibrium was severely shaken for the first time since I had met him. It was no longer enough for him to teach. Already half the student body had deserted the college.

"How long can it go on?" he asked, brooding. "And even if all the students attended classes, what am I to teach them? With Europe racked by war, and India caught in an agony of her own, they are learning from the terrible examples around them."

"The other day," he went on, "Sahdev called the college a cloister. It is a haven, it is true, but if I did not believe it was more than that, I could not have taught there for so long."

Madan had sought its atmosphere not only because he had been bred to it and found it the most natural one for himself, but also because he had sincerely believed in its ultimate good. What did India need more than the enlightenment of an education? It had been the repeated fulfilment of a challenge to watch each new generation of young minds flower to a love of learning and an appreciation of the values that would outlast the passions and fevers of an era.

"But it does not seem possible to go on teaching," he said. "Why?"

How tangled we all were in our different concepts of service, I thought. How often we questioned and doubted. Madan was hurt, and I could think of no way to help him.

For him Indian history had always been a palpable thing. There was a link as sturdy as a flesh bond between himself and those remote Vedic ancestors who, more than two thousand years before Christ, had swept into India to begin the recorded saga of her heritage. To Madan they were real people, their joyous invocations to the gods, their bold ad-

venturousness more real than the puny life around him. The temples with the fantastic, richly imagined carvings of their descendants, the later Hindus, were reminders, too, of his past, as were the traditions of the Muslim sultans and emperors.

"Some magic assimilative quality," he said, "made sons of them all, the native-born and the stranger. Even those who came here as conquerors, flashing swords and spilling blood, remained to become Indians and to contribute their genius to this country. What is India but the combined product of them all?"

"Then, Madan, if India has risen above every trial with a new maturity, she will rise above this one, too."

"Yes," he said slowly, "she will rise. But it would be simpler, far simpler, if these conquerors would, like the others, pause to breathe the message of this air, to grieve at the tragedy of this scene and rejoice in its splendour. Let them take all they want of her—what is there to stop them?—but let them ennoble her in some way in return."

We were sitting in his study, his desk with books and papers piled high upon it, between us. I got up to go.

"I am leaving Sharanpur today," I said. "We may not meet for several months."

His eyes held the look of pain which had been there since the disturbances had begun. I felt depressed at leaving him. Alone with his books he would struggle, night after night, to re-create his mutilated dream of the past, wondering whether his faith in it would ever be fulfilled.

Sahdev was killed a few days before his twenty-first birthday, and at a time when the town was calm. All agitation had died down, and the students, those who had not been arrested, had gone back to their studies. I did not come to know of his death till I was released from jail and returned to Sharanpur. It was Savitri who told me.

"I had been collecting the ingredients for the *pūja*," she

said. "His birthday was so close. I had placed orders for sweets and fruit. And then as I was going about my work one morning, his body was brought home."

The man who brought it, sweating with fear, gave her a garbled account, for in his state of shock she could get no clear explanation from him.

"Mataji," he sobbed at Savitri's feet, "he did nothing. He was walking along the pavement and a *mem* was coming toward him. There was a police lorry across the road, and I think one of the *goras* was drunk. He must have been drunk, Mataji, for how could sober flesh and blood commit such horror?"

Savitri's eyes were glazed when she repeated this to me. "I wanted to ask him where, which road, what time it had happened," she said, "but he kept babbling hysterically. Finally I got the facts from him."

"He—the *gora*—held a rifle. They all did. And he ordered the boy off the pavement. I also was on it, Mataji, and I got off, but the young one, I don't know why he would not obey. He went on walking, quite calm. Had I but had the presence of mind, I would have dragged him off myself, but I feared for my own life—may God forgive me. My life was over, his had but hardly begun."

"Hush," Savitri stopped him as he started to sob again. "Each man can live only to his appointed hour. Do not chastise yourself. Tell me, did he die at once?"

Had God at least spared him pain?

"Yes, of that I am certain," swore the stranger. "The *gora's* mark was accurate. The boy fell at once, and not a sound escaped him. The lorry left him there and drove away. It was then that I fetched some others to help carry him here."

"How did you know he lived here?" she asked dully.

"Everybody knows he lived here, Mataji. Have we not seen him since he was a child, with his little sister in every part of the town? He had a kind heart and a gentle voice."

"His saying that helped me more than I can say," Savitri



told me. "It is a great consolation to know that the one you love is not forgotten by others."

My expressions of sympathy were inadequate. There was little I could say to this courageous woman who bore her loss with such dignity.

"It was so needless," she went on quietly. "I cannot believe his Bharat Mata expected such a sacrifice of him, though that is how he must have felt. I could not understand why I had not been taken in his place. But, worst of all, I could not bear to see life continuing after him as though nothing had happened. The living are so remorseless. It was a cruel thing. Oh, not only because he was a young man, not just that he was my son, but a boy so full of promise. There was a radiance about him. . . ."

In her acceptance of the universe and its eternal laws she could not question her loss for long. She could not upbraid destiny for bringing this calamity on her household.

"God Himself," she said, "all-powerful though He is, is omnipotent only in the realm of goodness. Who knows, perhaps He Himself weeps for all who suffer, realizing His own helplessness before evil."

"Do you know, Savitri, you are a remarkable woman?"

"Why? Because I do not bruise my head futilely against a stone wall?"

"No. Because stone walls do not exist for you. Because your vision stops only at the horizon."

She brushed away my remarks and smiled. "I wish you would speak to Kusum," she said. "It was worse for her than for the others. I don't think she will ever forget."

"She must not forget," I said. "It is the mistake we all make, trying to forget what has hurt us. We must remember. Only then can we see things in their proper perspective, the balanced whole instead of just the hurting part."

I had hoped that telling Sanad about Kusum's family might give him some perspective about her. I thought he

might be a little more circumspect about getting to know her. Apparently my account had just the opposite effect. When I went to the Sahais', Kusum met me at the door and took me to our favourite place, the garden wall.

"That man I met with you," she said. "He came here. Did you know?"

"No," I replied, astonished that Sanad had not waited for me to accompany him. "Why?"

"He brought flowers," she giggled weakly. "Flowers—*here!*"

I burst out laughing at the picture of Sanad armed with flowers, expensive ones from the one newly opened florist in Sharanpur, standing in a garden surrounded by flowers.

"When I called Jumna to put the flowers in water, she stared at him as though he were not in his right mind."

"And what did he say?"

"That he was sorry about something. I could not understand what. He did not say much."

"Kusum," I began on an impulse, wanting to smooth the way for Sanad's next visit, "have you, personally, had a proposal of marriage?"

"One," she said, "from him."

I sat dumbfounded. Her eyes filled with sudden tears, and she twisted the end of her sari between her fingers as she had a way of doing when she was upset or embarrassed. The tears spilled down her face and she wiped them with the corner of her sari. I could not help noticing that her hands were as grubby as a child's and that she left a streak on her face. I felt irritated with Sanad for having invaded her sheltered world so unceremoniously.

"These things happen, little one, when one grows up. It is nothing to be upset about."

"I'm not upset, just confused. Does he have no manners, to come to me this way? I don't know him at all." Her voice was high-pitched with tears.

"Shall I bring him to meet your father?"

"He met him that day."

Sanad had not left much for his second visit.

"Did you like the young man?" I asked Kusum.

"How should I know?" she said pathetically. "He just came and went, and I hardly knew what was happening."

"If you like, I can come with him next time so that you can get to know him a little better, and without tears." I smiled.

She smiled back a little tremulously. "Being a woman is either all laughing or all crying. I hardly ever feel in between," she said. "It's constantly up and down, and no rest."

"And yet the only truly serene people I have known have been women," I told her. "Your mother is one of them."

"Yes, but that's afterward," she sighed, "long afterward."

After all the heights and depths have been levelled by living and understanding has risen from all the confusions, I thought.

"They want me to get married," she said.

"And so you should. Don't you ever think of it yourself?"

"Yes, but not to a real person," she said, bewildered.

"I am quite certain that real people make better husbands." I talked nonsense to humour her. "For one thing, they are there."

Jumna, coming toward us, eyed Kusum suspiciously. "She has been crying. You must have been talking to her of marriage. Malini Bibi is younger than you," she told Kusum matter-of-factly, "and her marriage has already been arranged."

"She is only a year younger," Kusum said, defending herself.

"A year in the life of a woman is a long time."

"Malini cries all the time now that her wedding day is so near."

"Well, and would she be going to her wedding laughing like a hyena? Naturally she cries."

Kusum and I exchanged glances of merriment.

"That sahib who came the other day," said Jumna in a tone that heralded doom, "is here."

Kusum stopped, worried and hesitant again.

"Your father and mother are with him," continued Jumna with satisfaction. "So are your brothers."

Jumna's tone indicated that a family conference was under way. Actually, Sanad was drinking fruit juice with Kusum's brothers. Madan happened to be in the same room reading his newspaper, and Savitri was already in another part of the house attending to her work. After a pleasant half-hour of pomegranate juice and harmless conversation, I firmly led Sanad away.

## CHAPTER III

☞ I DO not pretend to understand why Sanad fell in love with Kusum. They belonged in different worlds. But he did, and when he told me about it I was more dismayed than I allowed him to see. He had come along and blithely announced the news on his way to his office one morning as though it was no weightier a matter than a discussion about the unseasonably cool weather we were having. For me it was considerably weightier.

What, I wondered, did Sanad mean by love? Was it a passing passion, common at his age? Kusum was too sweet a creature to be sacrificed to this. Or was it something more? I could not tell. I felt peculiarly at a loss. Advice I had given him in plenty whenever he had come to me for it, but about this I knew nothing. Besides, he had not asked my advice. I felt wary of the responsibility he had placed on me, however, knowing that Govind Narayan would have his reservations about such a match. I did not know what to do.

I could have gone to Rohan Masi, as active and alert and interested in the futures of the young as she had ever been. But she had always had a lively disregard for the individual, treating all young people as if they had been born to be mated by sensible elders such as herself. She would, in this case, say it was a highly unsuitable match and call me names for allowing it to go this far. Going to her would be asking for a condemnation of the whole affair. Yet I had to go to someone, if not to talk about it, at least to get some sort of perspective about it, someone who was married, who was humane and understanding. Ordinarily I should have spoken to Savitri, but it was her daughter who was concerned.

The matter was decided for me when, a day or two after Sanad's announcement, a note arrived for me. It was from Prabha, Harilal Mathur's first wife. She had heard that I had come to her daughter Usha's wedding, the note said, and had waited for me to come indoors and congratulate her. She was very disappointed that I had gone away without seeing her. Did I think I was not welcome since my mother was no longer alive? She begged me to call on her on any evening convenient to me. She was always at home.

I surprised the servant who had brought the note by saying I would go myself in reply. "Bibiji will not be expecting you," he stammered, but I had made up my mind, and he followed me at a respectful distance along the road.

Prabha had a private entrance to her side of the house, and Mother and I, when we had gone to see her, had always used it. There was a small porch and, facing it, a semi-circular lawn littered with orange pips, scraps of paper, and other untidy odds and ends. Prabha, when she noticed the litter, apologized for it by saying no one could control the slovenly habits of the passers-by. One word from her would have controlled them, but she had not the heart to say it.

Indoors there were a courtyard of cobbled stones and two rooms, one Prabha's bedroom and the other a sitting-room she used during the day. In good weather, however, she sat in the courtyard, on a *nivar* bed, and there was another *nivar* bed beside it for visitors. Here she received guests and tradesmen alike.

Prabha had had no formal education. She could read and write a little Hindi, just enough for her household purposes. She was not interested in books otherwise and had seen no need to advance her knowledge. She was, for all that, a person of wide interests, with a plain but pleasant face and a frank manner—a comfortable sort of woman to whom a man could talk freely without being conscious of the barrier of sex. I had always liked her, and the reason I did not see her oftener, apart from the fact that I disliked Harilal, was that

she did not go out much. Since his second marriage, she had hardly left the house.

I walked into the courtyard, the outer door not being barred, and saw her sitting cross-legged on her *nivar* bed. I stopped abruptly, for Harilal was sprawled luxuriously, if inelegantly, on the other bed, in *pyjama-kurta*, and Prabha's maid was massaging his head. She was obviously enjoying a joke with her master and mistress because they were all laughing. Prabha was peeling vegetables, not methodically, but in a haphazard fashion, sending potato peel in long curling strips on to the floor and slices of potato with it. Ants would soon collect there in a busy heap and have to be frightened away, as Prabha would not allow them to be destroyed by having water thrown over them.

She was a big woman. Strands of hair had escaped from her loosely knotted bun and hung to her shoulders. She always gave the impression of having nothing on under her outer garments. Her breasts swelled ample and unconfined under her blouse, and her sari was carelessly arranged. As I entered, Harilal raised himself from his bed, swung his feet to the ground, and went over to her. The back of his hand caressed her throat and chin and stopped suddenly as he saw me standing in the doorway. I don't know who was the more embarrassed, he or I. I certainly felt awkward, finding him, as I had never seen him before, as he would never have dreamed of showing himself. He was obviously angry. His face became a stiff, smiling mask as he invited me in. There was nothing else he could do, as I was already in.

"I do hope you'll excuse me," he said in his clipped way. "I'm meeting Tom for a round of golf."

Golf had so little to do with that setting, the cobbled stones, the lazy intimacy of the two beds side by side, the caress my presence had so rudely interrupted. But Harilal was Sir Harilal again. He hardly gave Prabha a passing glance as he left.

Prabha had not moved. She continued to sit cross-legged

on her bed, smiling a welcome, peeling her potatoes, and asked me to sit down.

"You have forgotten me," she accused.

This was so true as to admit of no denial. Prabha was just the sort of woman whose existence one was likely to forget.

"But I have forgiven you," she added warmly.

"You are a forgiving person," I told her.

I wondered whether she would take this remark as alluding to her personal life. She did, and it did not embarrass her any more than my unannounced presence in the doorway had.

"What is there to forgive, after all?" She smiled. "The ones whom we love, we do not judge, and the ones we don't care for do not interest us in any case."

Her common sense was as characteristic as her large, placid presence. I was bathed in a comfortable, spreading silence. In the neem tree whose shade overhung the yard, blue-grey pigeons gurgled gutturally. A regiment of tiny ants paraded past my feet.

"Your daughter was married in great style," I said.

"You did not like it," she guessed shrewdly. "I myself did not want so much fanfare, but he"—she meant her husband—"would have it no other way. And he likes to do things as he thinks fit."

I took a turnip from the basin of vegetables beside her and munched it.

"He is very fond of Usha," she went on. "I was so unhappy when she was born. He had wanted a son badly. But Usha has brought us much joy. He adores her. He settled two lakhs on her at her marriage, did you know? Well, Fate knows best." She spoke tolerantly, as though not blaming Fate for its inconsistencies. "That's why he married again, because he wanted a son, not because he does not care for me."

Her sari slipped off her shoulder and she went on peeling potatoes absently, not covering herself modestly again.

Perhaps every man needed two wives, I thought, the storm



and the refuge. Whatever storms might rage in Harilal's life, this refuge—his only one, I suspected—remained. I had seen it in his relaxed contentment on the *nivar* bed, in the careless sensual gesture of his hand against her throat. She was his home, his haven. With her he could abandon all pretence, all ambition, and be most blissfully himself. He would never outgrow his need of her.

"Tell me," I said, "you said a little while ago one does not judge those whom one loves. Prabha, is love very important?"

It was not a question I would have asked anyone else. But here, in this stone-walled, cobbled interior where the neem leaves and the pigeons' wings made the only stir, I was sure it would have some meaning.

"To a woman, yes. A man has other things to occupy him."

"Yes, yes, I know that. But in marriage, is it necessary to be in love?"

She laughed throatily. "You are speaking to one who was married at the age of fifteen without ever setting eyes on her groom."

"And how did you find marriage?" I asked.

"As any young and inexperienced girl should who is given in marriage to a man of my husband's good and considerate ways. It was the only thing in life. And do you know why? Because all life was ahead to be discovered."

"It depends, then, on whom one marries. You might have been miserable, after all."

"Everything depends on Providence."

She used the Hindi word *honhar*, which means "what must be." And she used it not with a sigh or a philosophical shrug but with a broad smile of amusement, and I guessed that whatever had come her way had found her waiting with a generous welcome. She was not a woman to sip at life's offerings. She was one to take deep draughts and, as likely as not, bring up a hearty belch or two on satisfying herself.

She shouted to her maid to take away the basin of vege-

tables that now lay peeled and chopped in uneven slices, and to clear away the peel that formed a small hillock of garbage on the floor. Her voice was far from melodious.

"Will you have a whisky?" she asked me.

I must have looked surprised.

"Yes, I keep it here now. A few years ago I fell ill. After I recovered, I was very weak. I had no appetite, and Colonel Ryan, who was superintendent at the Grenfield Hospital at that time, recommended a glass of port before meals. He said there was nothing wrong with me, only that my appetite needed stimulating, and that a mild stimulant like a glass of wine would help. I had never taken an alcoholic drink in my life, and I protested, but my husband insisted. He said he did not care what I believed or did not believe. I must do as the doctor said. I cried, I complained, I even quarrelled with him, but he was adamant. He was so concerned that he used to bring me the glass of port himself every evening, not trusting it to me alone or to a servant, and he would stand over me till I finished it. I used to make a terrible fuss, drinking it like medicine. But in time I grew to like it. I didn't feel hungry without an appetizer."

She gave me a pleased look.

"Then my husband started bringing his own glass of whisky and drinking it here before going in to dinner—I don't eat in the dining-room, you see."

"And you got used to the whisky," I added.

"It gives a pleasant feeling," she admitted, flicking an adventurous ant off her ankle and scratching the spot vigorously, "and there is nothing in our *shastras* against it."

"On the contrary," I assured her, "the Vedas extol the beauties of the 'soma juice.' The gods themselves feasted on it."

The maid appeared with a tray containing two glasses, a decanter of whisky, and a jug of soda.

"Will you not change your mind?" Prabha persisted when I shook my head.

"All right, I will," I said on an impulse.

I need hardly say that I was pleasantly transported after one drink and declined another. It was good to lounge on the *nivar* bed, gazing upward at the dusty sunlight filtering through the neem branches above me. Stranger things have happened than that a man, abstemious by nature, should drink a large peg of whisky with the dishevelled wife of a man he dislikes.

"Are you thinking of getting married?" Prabha asked.

I raised myself on one elbow. "No, certainly not. What gave you that impression?"

"All your questions about love."

"Oh, my questions . . . I was wondering about two young people I know. The boy says he is in love. . . ."

"And the girl?"

"Well, she is still a child in many ways. She is uncertain. . . ."

"He will convince her," Prabha said with a slow smile.

It may have been the sudden spirit of release stealing over me which persuaded me to let Sanad and Kusum go their own way unhindered, or it may have been the conversation I had had with Prabha. Whatever it was, I made up my mind not to interfere. If happiness could come out of so unlikely a set of circumstances as Prabha's, surely it could flow from less complicated circumstances. At any rate, who was I to stand in the way of its remotest chance?

A year later, in February 1947, Sanad and Kusum were married. If it was not the match Govind Narayan and Lakshmi would have liked for their son, it was only the beginning for them and for us all of the many changes we were soon to see. In August of that year our country became free, and the future, which had always seemed so far ahead, so much in the realm of fancy, was upon us.

# ❧ *Part Three* ❧

## CHAPTER I

❧ I WENT to the Sharanpur Club for the first time at McIvor's invitation. It hadn't been a very explicit invitation. He had breezily said: "Drop in at the Club about twelve o'clock if you're doing nothing. You can watch me having a bottle of beer." He had added as an afterthought: "You wouldn't consider having one, too, would you, now that India is free?"

I had had to laugh at that. "I haven't taken any pledge. I just don't like the stuff."

He had looked at me in disbelief. "Oh, all right, but come along to the Club if you feel like it. I'm nearly always there on a Sunday morning by the pool."

So when I arrived there on a simmering April morning, I was not sure I would find him. I was not in a hurry to get to the pool either. I had no notion, in fact, exactly where the pool lay, as the Club was a large building with rambling grounds. This visit was in the nature of an exploration for me. I had gone out of curiosity, wanting to see what the place I had passed by so many times in my life looked like. The pool itself was the chief attraction, especially during the hot months, but I wanted to explore the main building first.

Before this, my single encounter with the Club and its

regulations had been when I was about eight years old. I had gone for my usual evening walk with our bearer, Takru. We had a garden at home, and I would far rather have stayed there and played with my cousins, but Father firmly believed in a daily constitutional. A youngster of my age needed exercise, he said, and a romp in the garden was not enough. So, enviously leaving my cousins shouting and running on our lawn, I set out with Takru, taking with me a rubber ball that I kicked along the road.

That evening our walk took us past the Sharanpur Club. We must have passed it time and again without my ever having noticed it before, but that day, because I longed to be at home in the garden, I looked through the chinks in the hedge and caught inviting glimpses of velvety lawn. It was a smooth, springing green, quite different from the dry brown *maidan* where Takru took me, and there were children playing on the green. If not my own garden, this one would do.

"Come on," I told Takru imperiously, "I want to play here."

"No, baba, it is not permitted."

I was surprised. There was very little I had not been permitted in my young life. "Who does not permit it?" I demanded.

"The Government," he replied.

It was his stock reply to questions about which he was vague. Who owned the beautiful chestnut horses that cantered along the road past our house in the early morning? Who brought the fruit and vegetables from the villages to the bazaars? "*Sarkar*" was the answer, solid, wooden, and irrefutable. For some time I thought the Government was responsible even for the rainbow in the sky and the cock's crow at sunrise. Whatever *Sarkar* was, it reached out in its vastness to encompass every aspect of life and nature. But this time the reply did not satisfy me.

"It is permitted," I told him scornfully. "You are blind. Can't you see children playing there?"

"Only the children of the white sahibs," he informed me, glad to be able to render one specific piece of information.

"White?" All colours had been the same to me till then.

"The English sahibs," he explained.

Annoyed at having been thwarted, and determined to make Takru take me in, I gave the ball a wilful kick as we passed the Club's gate. It bounded along the gravel drive, bumped against the wall just beneath an open window, and lodged in the thorny shrubbery below it. A man working at a desk in the room looked up at the sound. Glancing out of the window, he saw my ball caught in the shrubbery below, then noticed Takru and me standing at the gate. I ordered Takru to run after the ball and fetch it, but he stood where he was, not moving, and the man in the window did not call out to him to come and retrieve his property. He shouted for a servant, but when none appeared he came outside himself, rescued the ball, and strode along the drive toward us. He was sand-coloured, had sandy hair, and wore spectacles on a high-bridged nose. His white shorts ended above bony knees.

"Well, there you are, young man." He smiled, handing me the ball. "Quite a kick that was. A bit harder and you'd have knocked the pane right out of the window. The Secretary'd have had something to say about that."

I stared up at the Englishman, for the first time recognizing him for what my bearer had called a white sahib. He looked more the colour of sand to me, and if that was the colour required to enter the Club, I preferred my own. I do not remember even thanking him for bringing me my ball, though Takru did a deferential salaam. It seemed entirely in accordance with the fitness of things and with my upbringing that this sand-coloured stranger should be fetching and carrying for me. It did not occur to me that Takru had not gone to fetch the ball because he was not allowed on the premises. I did not give the Club and its laws another thought in all the times I walked and drove by it.

Now, inside the building for the first time, I was full of

curiosity. I found myself in a dim, carpeted interior, a relief after the April glare, and through the dimness I gradually discerned a portrait, massively framed, that may have represented the Club's founder. The gentleman, I was convinced, must have founded something. Heavily side-whiskered, rigidly erect, scarlet-clad with gold braid and buttons, he could not have let life glide by without leaving some stern reminder of himself upon it.

From the central corridor where I stood, I turned to the right and came to the dining-room. Here the walls were lined with hunting prints, and already the steward was busy giving instructions for the buffet. Bowls of salad stood on the table, and platters of beef and ham and chicken were being brought from the pantry by bearers.

The steward saw me in the doorway and turned to me enquiringly. "Yes?" he said, and after a second added: "Sir?" It was evident I was something new in his scheme of things.

"Nothing," I apologized. "Could you direct me to the library?" A building of this size was sure to have a library.

"It is just across the corridor," he said, and looked after me, puzzled.

The library was the picture of a perfect library. Books lined the walls, many of them in old leather bindings with faded gold lettering. There were deep leather chairs, too hot for the Sharanpur climate, and crimson carpets that emanated warmth. There was a fireplace, a large old-fashioned one that could have been used only for five or six weeks in the year, and in front of it an array of shining brass fire-irons. From one wall a wind-blown Shelley gazed wistfully down on me, and on another an early Victorian belle fondled a lamb in a pastoral setting.

The library had obviously been designed by a man who dreamed of snowflakes drifting past the windows, of vintage port sipped in the depths of an armchair, of warmth and plush comfort on a wintry day. I wondered why he had not gone home to what he had missed so much. For a moment

the overpowering nostalgia of all those generations of exiles who had conjured up snowflakes in Sharanpur gripped me, and I felt sorry for them. How the demon sun must have mocked their fancies!

From the corridor came the voices of men who I supposed had just come from the tennis courts.

"Mind you, that was a fast game. I thoroughly enjoyed it. But golf's the real game, believe me. You'll find golf *stays* with you."

The other voice murmured an inaudible reply.

"I know, I know," went on the first. "I didn't feel I'd exercised till I'd sweated a gallon either when I was your age, but I know what I'm talking about. Golf's the game."

Their voices became indistinct as they walked past.

I realized as I wandered from room to room and finally made my way toward the pool that I had entered a world altogether new to me, one that so far had existed only beyond the neat hedge that divided the Club from the rest of Sharanpur. It was a world built on imagination, sustained by the power that only imagination can provide, and more and more I felt as I came to know it that the imagination is truly a wonderful thing. Nothing, not the Indian brain-fever bird with its flat, staccato cry, not the dust-laden leaves of the mango trees in the garden, not even the fiery reality of the air breathed each instant, could dislocate the fantasy. It had reigned supreme these many years, an island of make-believe in Sharanpur.

Most of fashionable Sharanpur must have been gathered at the pool that morning. All the tables were occupied, and a conversational hum filled the air. Potted plants were grouped at intervals along the verandah, and the green-and-white cane furniture smelled faintly of new varnish. The pool's turquoise water winked and sparkled under the sun. Beyond it extended the Club's lawns, now faintly scorched. Flowerbeds that had lately held gold and purple pansies and rows of



pastel-shaded sweet peas were bare but for a few shrunken flowers.

I saw Dora Grange even before I saw McIvor, who was sitting right beside her. She was at a big centre table under a fan, the most prominent position on the verandah, a half-finished gimlet before her. Perspiration beaded her upper lip despite the fan overhead, and the crisp white frock that stretched tautly across her plump thighs would soon lose its freshness, but Dora had, nevertheless, the crowning assurance of the leading memsahib of the social set in Sharanpur. It was visible in the way she nodded toward one acquaintance, smiled toward another. I had never seen her so assured before, but then I had never been to the Club before. The official court might have been in Delhi, but here in Sharanpur there had been a *durbar*, too, and for some time now it must have been presided over by Dora. I was fascinated by the sight of her, regal and aloof.

How late I had come on the scene! For a minute I felt genuine concern for Dora because the domain she ruled so splendidly was slowly slipping from her grasp. Soon she would be no more than just another person on the Club verandah, one more member. Already the scene had changed drastically, for there were bare brown bodies beside the white ones splashing in the pool. I felt a surge of sympathy for her, and would have done anything in my power to preserve that little kingdom intact for her. The world is so full of unhappy people—how good, how satisfying it would have been to clear the Club of all its alien elements and return it to Dora, saying: "Here is your importance. Long may it last to bring you joy." But I was no magician to bring about such a feat, and by my very presence I was hastening the disappearance of her dream.

"What are you standing there staring for?" McIvor called out. "Haven't you ever seen people swimming? Come and join us."

And once again, with the strange awareness my stroll through the Club premises had given me, I felt a queer kinship with Dora and looked at the scene as I was sure she was looking at it. Yes, I had seen people swimming before, but there was something slightly incongruous about the brown bodies so recently permitted in that turquoise water. She must be thinking so. In her twenty-odd years in India she must have seen more naked than clothed Indians, but those would have been working people, labourers on the road, and beggars. The Indians she met in her own walk of life were customarily adequately clothed, offering a polite greeting and then proceeding on their way. One did not look at them unclad, I could imagine her thinking, or jump in and out of the water with them in this nonchalant fashion.

"Well, come on, man. Have you got a touch of the sun?" called McIvor, and I shook myself out of my reverie and went toward his table.

"It was coming out of those dark Club rooms into all this sunlight," I apologized. "For a minute I couldn't get my bearings."

"You know each other," said McIvor.

"I should say we do," said Dora before I could speak. "Long before he became terribly patriotic with all his jail-going."

I would have reminded her that I had already become a jail-goer when she met me, but her words gave me a small shock. I felt like a man at a fair caught by disfiguring mirrors, some elongating him in a sinister fashion, others bloating him comically. And I was only a part of the fantasy. There were Indians swimming at the Sharanpur Club, and the leading memsahib was talking of patriotism and jail-going.

Dora drank her gimlet rather fast and rang the bell on her table to order another. She looked across at her husband at the pool's edge, dangling his legs in the water. Tom, getting to his feet, came over to us, a frown on his face.

"Don't be stuffy, Tom," she said, forestalling his arguments. "It's Sunday."

Tom did not argue. He greeted me, then picking up the towel that lay across his chair and, throwing it over his shoulder, he disappeared into the dressing-room just behind us to change.

"Tom's in his Sunday mood," declared Dora, and took a sip from her fresh gimlet. "Actually, he's working too hard. He ought to take leave. I keep telling him so. He could easily get away. Naini Tal's close enough, or Mussoorie."

"Or the Swiss Alps by air," remarked Tom dryly, coming back for the lighter he had left on his chair. "But it would hardly be practicable from the firm's point of view."

"It's Sunday," Dora repeated tartly. "Let's forget about the firm."

Tom had disappeared into the dressing-room.

"Good morning, Dora, my dear," said the advancing figure of Sir Harilal Mathur.

Dora-my-dear beamed on him. "Come and join us, Harilal."

"If you will have a drink with me." He smiled, his teeth shining brilliantly in his polished dark face.

He acknowledged my presence with the briefest of nods.

"The pool is inviting today," he remarked, seating himself, and I couldn't help thinking his tone sounded proprietary when he spoke of it. "Won't you be going in?"

"Heavens, my swimming days are over," Dora said.

"Don't talk that way. That's more like our Indian attitude. You Europeans don't have these absurd ideas. But here I go speaking of other things instead of ordering your drink."

Harilal looked ridiculously like an obliging little automaton, I thought. Did Dora want a drink? He was there to offer it. Did she want reassurance as to her own importance? He was there to provide it. Yes, Dora. No, Dora. What can I do for you, Dora? He reminded me of a marionette prancing to a jolly tune, with Dora manipulating the strings.

"What are you doing with yourself these days?" he asked me.

The fact that I could stroll in to see his wife at any hour of the day, as I frequently did, indicated that I wasn't doing much. I confirmed his suspicion. "Nothing much," I replied. "It's rather pleasant."

"Oh, really?" Harilal said.

McIvor, for whom Harilal had just ordered a beer, took out his pipe and started wadding tobacco into it. "The art of doing nothing," he said amiably, "is what our friend here has cultivated to perfection."

"I resent that," I said. "There's a common misconception that doing something involves making money. I happen to have a little of my own, and I'm not interested in doubling it." I realized I was uttering a heresy.

"What exactly are you interested in?" Harilal pinned me down.

"I do a bit of reading and writing. And I've just started Sanskrit lessons. I've always wanted to learn, and now at last I have the time."

"Oh, really?" Harilal said.

"Gracious!" Dora exclaimed. "But what about the times you were in jail? Wasn't there all the time in the world to learn Sanskrit?"

"I suppose there was, only sometimes the opportunity and the mood don't coincide."

McIvor asked me whether I had lost all interest in cottage industries.

"Not at all," I told him, "but so many people who were not interested in them before have taken up the cudgels on their behalf, and they are very much the concern of the Government now."

Tom had joined us again. "I understand a Village Industries Week is being organized next month. The Chatterjis are coming down for it from Calcutta—that is, he's coming down on some business of his own, and she's coming in con-

nection with these cottage industries. She's inaugurating the Week, in fact. They're staying with us."

"Ronu Chatterji?" Harilal asked.

"Yes, Sir Ronu. D'you know him?"

"Know him?" Harilal repeated with a little laugh. "My dear Tom, Ronu and I were at Oxford together. I know him very well indeed. I've known him for close on thirty years, d'you realize?"

"Well, well. Then you must come to the reception that's being given for him and Lalita here at the Club by the Village Industries Board."

"I haven't been sent a card, you know," Harilal said.

"The cards haven't gone out yet. I'll see you get one. The fella who's in charge of the Board wanted me to invite the Chatterjis' friends." Tom turned to me. "But surely you know them too? Lalita does a lot of work for village products in Bengal."

"I've met Ronu. I didn't know Lady Chatterji was interested in the villages. I'm glad to hear she is. She has great organizing ability."

"Extraordinary, my dear chap, extraordinary. She's a talented woman by any standards. Do come to the reception for them. She's particularly asked us to invite people connected with village work."

"I don't do much now," I protested.

"Give up," McIvor said. "If you're going to live in Sharanpur, you've got to mix with people. Otherwise, go into retirement in the Himalayas."

"Tom," Dora said, "you didn't tell me Ronu and Lalita were coming in May. I shall have to postpone my departure for Mussoorie."

"I just heard from Ronu yesterday, actually. I must have forgotten to mention it."

"God, the hills have a lovely faraway sound," McIvor said.

"I'd give my right arm to get out of this stewing-pot."

"There's nothing very romantic about Naini Tal," Dora

said matter-of-factly. "The place I stayed in last time didn't even have the flush system."

She missed Tom's look because she was watching the swimmers. The heat made glittering steel of the water. There were very few people in it now, but a great many sat at tables round the pool, their skins gleaming wetly in shades of salmon, gold, and brown under striped umbrellas. Dora, sipping her gimlet, seemed absorbed by the sight.

"What do you think of the membership being thrown open?" she suddenly asked me.

"I don't know," I replied feebly. "It's inevitable, isn't it?"

"I can't see why. After all, no one is preventing Indians from having their own club. I should think they'd feel more at home in a place of their own."

"I think they look quite happy," McIvor said.

"Well, of course, but that's hardly the point, is it? It's all this bravado that's in the air nowadays. They just want to make themselves felt, that's all. It's so childish."

Tom sat stunned and Harilal attentive. Only McIvor twinkled his amusement over his tankard of beer.

"You can't hand independence over to people as a gift. They simply don't know what to do with it," Dora said. "Look at the size of this country and all its problems. I remember the Bengal famine in '44. The thought of it still makes me nervous. Tom had to go to Calcutta on business, and I went with him. You wouldn't believe it—the streets were lined, literally lined, with corpses. You actually stumbled over them going into Firpo's or the Three Hundred. And the smell! Nauseating!"

"That was in British times, Dora," McIvor said agreeably. "They're managing things much better now."

"I think you enjoy making irresponsible statements," she reprimanded him. "You can't mean half the things you say."

Dora picked up the magazine lying near her chair and flicked through it impatiently, leaving it open before her on the table. The sun shone on the page and I could only faintly

see the stock illustration, the doll-faced woman in the arms of the lean, dark man, the eternal fairy-tale inviting the reader to believe its unlikely legend for a little while. Dora glanced at it, then restlessly about her, at the burning sheet of water imprisoned in the rectangle of stone, at the dark figure poised arrowlike on the diving-board above it, at the hibiscus blossoms, shocking as bleeding wounds, on the hedge.

"Isn't it time to go home, Tom?" she asked sharply. "I've got a raging headache, with all this glare."

Harilal was full of solicitude. "You ought to wear dark glasses, my dear," he said anxiously. "You know how it affects the eyes."

I thought his avuncular concern a little comic in view of the fact that he and Dora were the same age and he was a good deal shorter than she.

The Granges said their good-byes and went away, and McIvor rose too.

"Now that you've set foot in the Club, shall we see more of you here?"

"A lot more," I promised him. "I have a feeling I am going to like this Club."

He grinned. "Knowing you, that statement has shades of meaning I wouldn't care to analyse."

On my way out I saw Sanad and Kusum at a table for two. They had been living at the Club for several months, not liking their suite at the Royal Hotel. I would have stopped and talked to them, but they looked preoccupied and none too pleased with each other, so I decided not to stay. How ill-at-ease newlyweds appeared. I still thought of them as newlyweds though they had been married over a year. They must have quarrelled over some trivial thing—perhaps he had not returned her smile when he woke or she had forgotten to do some little service for him which had become habitual between them. The young lived in a land of hills and valleys. They knew nothing of the placidity and poise of later mar-

ried life. If I had seen them looking utterly assured, I might have worried that all was not well between them.

I hurried after McIvor, asking him if he would give me a lift.

"By the way," I said as we got into his car, "who is the august-looking gentleman whose portrait hangs in the hall? Is he the Club's founder, by any chance?"

"Good Lord, no. The old boy was dead before the Club was thought of. He's Sir Charles Kittering, the youngest of a distinguished line of Kitterings who served in India. He saw some marrow-chilling action during the Mutiny, defended a garrison single-handed, more or less, and wiped out any number of mutineers. I understand he went about it in an imaginative way. Had the natives strung up on mango trees to give them time to repent before he blew them to bits. Something of that kind. He was knighted for valour. If Sharanpur has a British hero, he's the one. There's a regular tome about him in the library."

I could never enter the Club after that without feeling that Sir Charles Kittering's ghost roamed the precincts, thoroughly disapproving of my *dhoti*-clad presence.



## CHAPTER II

☞ AT first when Sanad and Kusum asked me to join them at the Club on Saturday evenings, I hesitated. I did not much care for their insistence on my company. They should have preferred to be alone. But they did insist, and I was flattered. I enjoyed meeting their young friends, and I found my incursions into Club life diverting.

It had a life of its own, with its own strict etiquette. You might pass a fellow member on the street with no more than a nod, but if you met him at the Club, your greeting was more cordial, and even the most cursory of acquaintances exchanged a remark or two about the weather, the cricket score, or the state of the stock market. It brought people together who might otherwise not have known each other, who, in fact, did not meet outside its bounds. It was a place where you could be somebody else for a while, or, if you preferred, more yourself. You could be the cultured gentleman of leisure, the prominent and influential citizen, or the debonair man about town. Who was there to question your assumption of any of these roles? I had been startled to see Dora giving and receiving greetings in a royal manner by the pool, but I found many who, like her, were enveloped in the delightful haze of personalities they had created for themselves. Within all the rules and regulations, there was a curious freedom to be the person one wanted to be. It was a masquerade, but one of personality. When I mentioned this to Sanad, he did not understand what I meant. The Club in Lucknow had been the centre of his social life, and he saw nothing extraordinary or diverting about people who joined clubs.

As to awkward situations arising because Indians were now permitted membership, I did not encounter any. The English

are nothing if not realistic, and what they cannot adapt themselves to is beautifully concealed by their perfect manners. The tradition of the stiff upper lip carries them through all grades of crises, and at the Club this was helped along by that immortal phrase, that classic refrain of leisure hours: "Have another drink, old man!"

I did not for a moment feel out of place, though I was differently dressed and did not drink. Tom said, when I told him of this: "You're the *koi hais* now, you know!" And again I had the sensation of standing before crazy mirrors and being blown up to an importance I did not feel. But, of course, what Tom meant was not me, or any particular individual, but the anonymous man in *khadi*, the much maligned *dhoti-walla*, who, once unnoticed except in jest, now stood like a colossus astride India. He was the *koi hai*, and all our fates rested with him.

There was one amusing exception to the company of light-hearted play-actors at the Club. This was Vir Das, a friend of Sanad's whom I had met recently. While I was content to stay on the sidelines, Vir was eager to join the throng, and his unceasing efforts never failed to entertain me. He was like a man hypnotized by the lights and music, stage-struck beyond redemption, but who cannot act and will never learn. Yet his eagerness to be accepted was genuine, and, though we laughed at him, we were all fond of him.

The Saturday-evening cocktail dance had already begun when I entered the ballroom with Sanad and Kusum and we made our way across the floor to our usual table. The musicians, perspiring in their dinner jackets, chugged out a succession of tunes in unvarying rhythm. Dora and Tom, with never-say-die expressions, conquered the floor in long strides and, reaching its edge, executed an unexpected series of side-wise steps before once more crossing its expanse. Harilal Mathur, with the industrious look of a man embarking upon chemical research, piloted Lady Mathur around the room, and when the music stopped, mopped his forehead with re-

lief. Depositing her at the table he was sharing with the Granges, he made his escape to the bar.

"If you don't stop staring at people," Sanad said to me, "we shall have to stop asking you here. What do you think this is, a circus?"

"The trouble with you," I told him, "is that you're spoilt. You've had far too much of everything since you were born. Otherwise, you would find a good deal more interest and amusement in ordinary things."

It was then that we saw Vir Das's enormous bulk in the doorway. He wore evening clothes and had a pink carnation in his buttonhole. He was perspiring profusely, and the look of worry sat as comically on his fat face as wrinkles on an apple.

Vir Das had come some months earlier to a post in Warburton and Samson Ltd., the Company of which Tom was head. He fondly imagined, and had frequently been told, that he was a fine figure of a man. In a country where, though slenderness was the norm, good health was often associated with overweight, he was considered something of a strong man. The clerks in his office admiringly referred to him as extremely healthy. As far as the British community were concerned, he possessed all the easy-going good-humour of the conventional fat man. His capacity for alcohol was staggering, and this in itself had been sufficient to establish him as a good sport.

Vir Das hailed from sturdy peasant stock. He had been born and brought up on his father's land in the Punjab on buffalo's milk and cream and *ghee*. It was his boast that as a child he had not waited for the fresh milk to be given to him in a glass. Always voraciously hungry, he had sucked it from the buffalo's teats. As no one could refute this statement, and as Vir Das's phenomenal size was convincing evidence of it, it was accepted as correct.

His parents, being well-off, had sent him to one of the best boys' schools in the hills. He had done none too well, intelli-

gence never having been his strong point, but he had been immensely popular with both the boys and the masters. He had got his present job through an influential connection of his father's. Warburton and Samson Ltd. needed a good contact man, and it was obvious that Vir Das, with his desire to please, would fill the role ably.

For all his highbrow schooling and his two years with the firm, he was still slow to react, and his English would never savour of anything but a struggle to learn it. He felt at ease only while speaking his own language, and he had not taken comfortably to any form of greeting except our traditional *namaskar*. Shaking hands, especially with a woman, embarrassed him painfully. His fat palms sweated, and I had heard that his handshake was surprisingly limp and lifeless for one so large.

Vir Das had reduced most things in life to basic formulas, so he was never worried by problems of analysis. There were good things and bad things, just as there were good and bad people. For those whom you liked, the earth itself was not gift enough. Those whom you disliked were incalculable wretches who had to be dealt with unsparingly. Women, similarly, fell into two categories. In Indian fashion, he regarded all women of respectable upbringing as his sisters or mothers, depending on their age, to be deferred to from afar, protected when the need arose, and otherwise left strictly alone. He was never quite comfortable in their presence, as he had nothing whatever to say to them. The other type of woman had been created for man's need and pleasure, and for her he had just one use. Sentiment did not enter either picture. In due course Vir would marry a suitable girl of decent upbringing and father numerous little Virs, and so the generations would move on.

He found himself a little out of his depth in the world of British business. The work was all right, but taking part in a social life in which the sexes mingled created numerous difficulties. He did not know what to make of European women,

whom, it appeared, he was bound to address in the same manner and with the same ease as the men. They drank nonchalantly, and they looked him directly in the eye. He did not know whether to seat himself in their presence or to remain standing. The Europeans, he noticed, sometimes sat down, sometimes got up, and he had not grasped when each posture was indicated. He did not dance because the very idea of clasping a woman so close in the public gaze was abhorrent to him. He did not know what to talk to the memsahibs about. He could not tell stories in their presence because the only ones he knew were of the bawdy variety that no well-brought-up woman should hear, and he could, in any case, relate them only in his own language. He could not discuss books because the few he had been compelled to read in school had long since escaped his memory. On the whole, the written word was a mystery to him. Even in his office, when any important mail was given to him, he usually turned it over to a clerk to be answered.

"These memsahibs," he said worriedly to me once, "am I to look at them or not?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Is it proper that I should look full at them, or should I avert my gaze?" he begged. "When they expose so much flesh and use so much paint, is this to attract attention, or only their custom?"

"Well," I told him, "I see no reason why you should avert your gaze, but, on the other hand, there is no need to stare."

"It is so difficult to know the right thing," he said sadly. "Perhaps it is the nature of females deliberately to mislead."

"Which female has been misleading you?" I asked.

"Before I came here I was in Delhi," he said, "and once I took a memsahib out. How did I know that the bare arms and the painted lips were not for my appreciation? But she screamed as if I had brutally assaulted her. She slapped my face and rushed from my car, leaving the door swinging open."

"You had better appreciate them from a distance," I suggested.

"It was the first and the last time," he vowed. "No more memsahibs for me. First the invitation, and then the screaming and slapping. I do not understand. Next time," he added with a grin, "the invitation must be more clear, and it must come from the memsahib in a way there is no misunderstanding."

Sanad saw Vir in the doorway and waved to him. Vir came to our table, his forehead still creased with worry. He greeted Kusum with his usual *namaskar* and then resumed his frown.

"What's troubling the champion today?" Sanad asked.

"I have committed a blunder of great proportion," Vir mourned.

"A big blunder," corrected Sanad. "Can't it be remedied?"

Vir turned to Kusum. "Sister, he laughs at me. He knows I cannot speak English as well as he can. I am a poor peasant."

The poor peasant seated his ponderous bulk and signalled a passing bearer. "Friend," he told the bearer, "if you will take pity on this suffering body, you will not delay in bringing refreshment—the largest whisky your measure holds, and do not insult it with too much soda."

And turning again to Sanad, he appealed, "I am your child, nothing can change that. . . ."

Because he was two years younger than Sanad, Vir deferred to him as he would have to a much older person. Sanad interrupted this confused discourse to ask his child what ailed him.

"The birthday of Mrs. Grange has been completely neglected by me. It is today. She is there at that table. I did not go to her house this afternoon to pay my respects, though some people from the office went. She must have noticed my absence and thought me crude."

"And rude, too," added Sanad with a shout of laughter.

"It's not too late," Kusum said kindly. "Why don't you go over now? She will be pleased."

"If it is your advice, Sister, I follow it blindfolded."

Vir waited, however, for his drink, and followed it with another before he lumbered over to the Granges' table. Embarrassed at the prospect of shaking hands indiscriminately, he smiled a vague smile that took in the whole table, and accepted Tom's invitation to join them.

"I'd better go and greet Dora too," I told Sanad and Kusum.

I went over to the Granges' table and found Vir making quite a ceremony of his greeting.

"My best respects to Mrs. Grange on this auspicious day," he announced with formal pomp.

"Why, thank you, Vir. How very nice of you." Dora smiled. "You'll join us in a glass of champagne?"

Vir looked unhappy, not knowing whether it would be polite to refuse a drink so generously offered, and Tom, noting it, said heartily: "I think Vir will stick to whisky, like me."

Vir relaxed, and we sat down in the chairs the bearer brought for us, Vir seating himself between Dora and me.

"How's the work going?" Tom asked him.

"Mr. Grange," Vir said reverently, "the Company is my father and my mother. What more can I say?" and as Lady Mathur collapsed in giggles he added: "It is my misfortune always to be funny."

"You're too good-natured, my boy." Tom laughed. "Everybody takes advantage of you."

Vir's fat legs took up most of the space under the table. Their size and girth made it difficult for him to hold them together. One leg frequently brushed mine, and the other, I suspect, must have brushed Dora's. She sat up suddenly as though she had had an electric shock. Recovering, she glanced out of the corner of her eye toward Vir. His face was as bland as ever, and nobody seemed to have noticed the

incident. Obviously an accident, she must have decided with relief. Tom was busy filling Lady Mathur's glass with champagne.

"The birthday of Mrs. Grange must be celebrated," declared Vir.

"We are celebrating," Lady Mathur giggled. "Champagne is for celebrations."

"Of this I have no knowledge. Of food I have knowledge. I invite you to honour me tonight by eating with me."

"Actually, Mrs. Grange has dinner laid on at the house," said Tom. "Why don't you join us?"

"Oh, bother the dinner at the house, Tom. Vir must have something more exciting in mind."

Vir beamed. "Then I shall go ahead to make the arrangements. And you must all come."

Vir gave me a lengthy description of the route to his favourite restaurant. It was in the heart of the bazaar, and I began to doubt whether Dora would be pleased if she knew where she was being taken, but by the time we left the Club a quantity of champagne had been consumed and Dora was ready for adventure.

Tom said he had a bottle of champagne on ice at the house, and that it would be a pity to waste it. The Mathurs having dropped out of the party, he suggested that Vir take Dora on to the restaurant while he and I collected the champagne.

It was years since I had been to the Granges'. The house they now occupied was not the little bungalow they had had when they had first come to India. It was a large one, single-storeyed, like most of the houses in Sharanpur, with a wide, polished verandah leading to an elegant drawing-room. The room, furnished by Warburton and Samson Ltd. for generations of its managers, was as impersonal as a formal illustration and as little indicative of its Indian environment as though it had been situated in some part of Europe. It bore no trace of the Granges' own lives. Tom told me he spent



most of his time in his "den" and Dora in her bed-sitting-room.

"All borrowed splendour," Tom said genially as I walked about, taking it all in. "I tell Dora to enjoy it while she can. She won't have all this when I retire."

And the same applied, I gathered, to the monogrammed silver in the dining-room. The table had been laid for two in its festive best for the birthday dinner. Gold-rimmed Paragon china and bell-shaped wine-glasses gleamed in the pale light from the pantry. The Granges' bearer had folded the white linen serviettes to look like swans. They had a satin shine. All this would pass on for the use of the next manager, as would the prestige and rank that accompanied it. The Granges would then be ordinary British subjects again, with nothing to distinguish them from a million of their countrymen. Tom seemed content to descend from the rostrum of the white sahib and become an ordinary Englishman when the time came, but Dora, I feared, would have to make a greater adjustment. Was it this thought that put the restive glance in her eyes? It must be hard to relinquish all that had become so accustomed a part of one's life, and at an age when adjustments are not easy. While I waited in the half-light, Tom took the bottle of champagne from the refrigerator and asked his bearer to put it in the car along with four glasses.

Some distance from the Club the smoothly tarred road gave way to a dusty one, and we jostled past bullock carts and *tongas* bumping their way to the bazaar. We drove past the neat Cantonment area, the single provision store, and the cinema.

"I don't think I've ever been on this side of town," said Tom, and by the time we arrived at our destination he was sure he had not.

We stopped the car at the entrance to a lane and walked from there. Double-storeyed buildings huddled together on either side of us. Women stood on balconies, their faces

powdered white, some plaiting long lank hair, some looking down into the street below. The sight might have been grotesque if there had been less noise, smell, and confusion. As it was, the chalk-white faces were no more out of place than clowns in a circus arena. Dora, perched on a wooden bench with a glass of whisky on an iron table in front of her, did not seem to mind.

The restaurant was neither clean nor comfortable, but what it lacked in comfort it made up in cuisine. Vir was a regular customer, and for his guests there were specially prepared dishes. Partridge, fish, freshly fried cottage cheese, and other delicacies appeared. The elusive bouquet of champagne rose from our glasses, struggled futilely with the overpowering smell of spices, and vanished like a wisp of smoke.

"Why can't the cook at home produce curry like this?" said Tom. "What kind of curry is this? I've never tasted anything like it before."

Dora was unusually docile. If she thought it incongruous that she should be sipping the Company's champagne next door to a house of ill repute in the filthiest part of the bazaar, her attitude gave no sign of this. I should not have dared bring her here myself. It struck me that only Vir, that "jolly good sport" who could "drînk with the best," could have brought the Granges to such a place without giving offence.

The restaurant-owner brought *pān* and whispered something in Vir's ear, at which our host turned on him and abused him violently. Did the worthless creature not realize he was in the company of white sahibs this evening? The restaurant-owner retreated hastily and Vir beamed on us again.

## CHAPTER III

३० SANAD came to my house straight from the office one evening just as my Sanskrit teacher was leaving. After setting my task for the next lesson, Panditji hummed as he bound his books in a square of cloth. He gave Sanad a friendly smile, nodding his shaven head with its jaunty tassel of white hair. It was not the first time they had met.

"Panditji, *namaskar*," Sanad greeted him.

Panditji mumbled his benediction, then his voice rang out with authority: "Sanskrit awaits you, my son."

Sanad had never had the courage to say he was not interested in Sanskrit. "Yes," he said hastily, "I am most eager to learn when time permits."

"You must permit time, my son." Panditji chuckled at his own wit. "Pursue her, pursue her. Ah, you are not even a student of Hindi," he went on, "or you would know what the poet Kabir has written of those who delay: 'Now is the only time. In an instant the deluge will be upon us. Where then will be the afterward?'"

My servant came in with the information that Panditji's *tonga* was waiting.

Panditji turned on him in annoyance. "Let him wait, that illiterate one! What is his unholy hurry? Daily I must needs cleanse myself after sitting on his *tonga* made of the hide of some slaughtered animal." He turned back to us with one finger upraised and quoted again: "'In an instant the deluge . . .' Tell me," he asked me abruptly, "this bomb they write of in the newspapers, is it likely to explode?"

"The atomic bomb?" I said. "Most certainly, Panditji. It has already exploded."

"On our fair land?" he cried, indignant.

"Not ours," I assured him, "but someone else's fair land, and several years ago."

"Ah," he said. He blessed us both and departed.

"You're hardly ever at home in the evenings," complained Sanad after Panditji had gone.

"Why should I stay at home when I'm a member of the Club now?" I demanded. "It was your idea, if you remember. Naturally I have a social life."

"I liked you better when you were going to jail," said Sanad.

"Thank you," I said dryly.

"You know what I mean," he went on. "You and the Granges are never apart. And as for Vir . . ."

"You introduced me to him," I reminded him.

I refused to be upset by Sanad's disagreeable mood. Panditji had been pleased with my progress, I had had a satisfying lesson, and I was about to start for my evening walk. I invited Sanad to accompany me.

"Where?" He prickled. "I'm not dropping in on the Granges."

"We needn't drop in on anyone. But what's all this about the Granges?"

"It's Dora," he explained. "She has an idea Kusum and I should call on her. And I'm not going to."

"There's no reason why you should."

"No, but Weatherby seems to think otherwise. He arrived this morning, and there's been a great to-do since."

We strolled through the Botanical Gardens, and Sanad told me about the talk he had had with Weatherby that morning.

Weatherby had been in no mood to exchange pleasantries on his arrival in the office. He had been disgruntled by an interview he had had with a Secretary of the Commerce Ministry a few days earlier at which he had not been able to put over his point. He had always hated Delhi, he fumed, and he

loathed it now. What exasperated him particularly was the Secretary's mild but firm refusal as he had sat there in his revolving chair.

"Dammit, Larry Cochrane used to sit in that chair," Weatherby said, glowering at Sanad. "In the old days all I had to do was put through a call to him from here and the thing was as good as done."

Sanad asked him what the Commerce Ministry's answer had been.

"I couldn't even put through a ruddy call now," growled Weatherby, ignoring him, "with the Secretariat full of unpronounceable names." He mopped the back of his neck with his handkerchief. "Bunch of extremists, that's what they are. What do they take us for? You'll see, they'll come round."

Sanad demurred. "Do you really think they'll alter their economic policy so that we can sell a few more bales of cotton every year?"

Weatherby uttered a brief but descriptive sound. "Economic policy! There was none of this nonsense going on a few years ago. Why suddenly all the changes?"

"The change is in the point of view," said Sanad.

"What's that?" Weatherby eyed him suspiciously. "I hope you're not turning into one of these radical types?"

Sanad reassured him on that point. "What reasons were you given for their refusal?" he asked.

"It wasn't a flat refusal, I tell you. One might understand that. They're ready to consider our scheme provided we give them certain guarantees. I ask you, has it come down to bargaining? Are we bazaar merchants to be haggled with?"

Weatherby looked up and saw Sanad still standing. "Sit down, blast you," he said irritably. "The man's a prima donna, that's all. We can't have our hands tied by absurd guarantees. You've got to remember we haven't just arrived in this country. We've been doing business here for the better part of a century, and our policy on important matters

hasn't been questioned before. Great heavens, man, we're here for the country's good."

Ignoring the bell on his desk, Weatherby thundered to the peon standing just outside the door to bring him a cup of tea.

"The whole trouble with these fellows in power is that hardly one of them has known what it is to have had three square meals a day. They've never had a brass farthing to their names. Couldn't make good anywhere, so they loafed around in jail. Call them political prisoners if you like, but the fact remains they've never done an honest day's work. And now they tell us how to run our show." He drummed on the table impatiently. "What's that ass of a peon doing, growing the tea leaves?"

The peon appeared and wiped the desk elaborately before setting the tray down on it.

"Come on, come on, I haven't got all day," Weatherby said tersely, and then to Sanad: "I'm told you haven't called on the Granges."

"No. Is that necessary?"

"He's a colleague of ours, dammit. You owe him that courtesy."

"So is Morari Lal our colleague and a number of other businessmen in the city. I haven't paid any of them social calls. In fact, I've never set foot in their homes for any reason whatever. We meet only on the business level when work demands it. I have nothing to do with them otherwise. Now I come to think of it, have the Granges paid formal calls on any of the local businessmen?"

"Don't be so bloody silly," Weatherby said. "What on earth are you talking about? Those men probably don't own a chair for a visitor to sit on. You can hardly put the Granges in the same category."

"Why not? It's logical, isn't it?" Sanad said obstinately.

But logic was hardly the point. One did what was fit and proper without getting involved in idiotic arguments about

logic, and Weatherby told him so. It was ridiculous, he said, to put the *bania* community on the same level as British business. It was not merely that *banias* were traditionally "sharp," but also that they had no compensating feature. Only the barest knowledge of the English language, for example. Then, it was appalling the way these individuals arrived for discussions in an odd assortment of clothing, as often as not chewing *pān*, and atrociously mispronouncing every word in the language. What a state of affairs had come to pass when one had to do business with them! But there was no escaping the fact that one had to, since some of them had amassed enormous fortunes during the war and were powers to be reckoned with.

Gloomily Weatherby stirred his tea. "Oh, confound it, Sanad, I don't care whether you call on anybody or don't. But Head Office cares. If the Granges complain of your behaviour, you'll hear from Calcutta. It's a small thing to do. Take the wife along and pay Dora Grange a call."

To his surprise, Sanad refused. "Who does she think she is?" he persisted. "Why should I call on her?"

"She thinks she is what she damned well is," roared Weatherby, pounding on the table, "the *bara memsahib* of Sharanpur! And if you have the intelligence of a numbskull, you should know it's easier to get a government to change its mind than a woman when she's determined not to. Now get out and stop being so blasted mulish. What's come over you? . . ."

"What *has* come over you?" I asked Sanad as we walked along. "Would Kusum object to paying Dora a call?"

"I haven't asked her, but I'm sure she would think me a fool if I suggested it. It's bad enough for her as it is, with all the adjustments she has had to make—and it's not the sort of thing her brother would have done."

"You can't hope to do what her brother did."

"Why not?" Sanad flared, instantly in arms.

"Because he died," I said calmly.

Sanad was sullen and silent.

"Don't you know," I went on, "there is never anyone nobler or better than the one who died? While we are in the land of the living it is wiser to compete only with one another, if we must, and best not to compete at all."

"It's all right for you to have that approach. You're free to behave as you choose. But I have a job to do, and it's annoying being told what to do and what not to do. If I think a thing is wrong, I'm not prepared to do it. Some things are a matter of principle."

"Would your principles suffer if you called on Dora?"

"Why should I add to her notion of her own self-importance?"

"Why shouldn't you?" I asked. "You know, I'd sacrifice a good many principles to make even one person genuinely happy. I have always felt there are so many discontented, frustrated people in the world that if it lay within my power to make just one such person truly happy I'd gladly do it. There are few things more annoying than a perpetually sour expression."

"You're daft," Sanad said, but he gave me a grudging smile. "Lately I've wondered what's the good of my remaining in this job," he said.

"Obviously the good in it is the good of it," I told him. "The rest you can ignore."

"What do you think it is, a six-course meal, that I can take what I like and leave what I don't like?" he asked.

"In a way," I said. "And what you don't like can discreetly be disposed of in your pockets or under the table instead of haughtily refused outright. Why hurt your host's feelings and make yourself appear a boor?"

"You sound like Father," Sanad said. "But, seriously, is it possible to take just the good, as you were saying, and leave the rest?"

"Possible? It's why there is a world at all. One can't go through life rejecting every situation and opportunity whole-



sale because of its limitations. If we did, very soon there would be no choices left for us."

He considered this a moment. "As far as my work goes," he said, "I feel it's a wall between me and so much that lies beyond. You can understand that, can't you? You know what I mean by what lies beyond. You've lived all your life on the other side."

His saying this made me think of the talk I had had years earlier with Sahdev. How different they were, the boy, long dead, with his mysterious recognition of "what lay beyond," and the young man beside me, struggling to reach it.

"I have the feeling of being lost in a crowd," he went on. "All I can see is the brown faces around me, and I keep wondering who they are and what there is in common between us. It shouldn't be that way. . . ."

He stopped, embarrassed. Talk like this did not come easily to him. The product of a public school, the representative of a textile empire did not have vague emotional stirrings he could not put into words.

"Do you think I'm making too much of it?" he appealed. "After all, everybody has a country. There's no need to make a song and a dance about it."

"Sanad," I said, "we are a people who worship idols. Never forget that. The song and dance come easily to us. The yearning to worship passionately, even flamboyantly, is in our bones. Have you ever noticed how a lover behaves? Sometimes he is elated, sometimes unaccountably depressed, often unreasonable. He is a man of unpredictable moods. Like him, we swing from opposite to opposite in a manner that surprises even ourselves. We are deeply religious, yet no country has made such a travesty of religion. We are spiritual, yet worldly. We have created beauty in all its forms, in art, in philosophy, in literature, to rank with the world's greatest, yet we tolerate the most appalling squalor about us. So if you cannot understand or explain your state of mind, don't be too despondent about it—it will work out in time."

I meant what I said, but to Sanad my words must have seemed mere words, with little relation to what was troubling him.

"D'you call this a walk?" he said. "I call it an amble. Why can't we sit down instead?"

"You people who get into the habit of doing violent exercise can never enjoy a leisurely stroll," I told him. "All right, let's sit down."

What happened was that I sat down on an uncomfortable stone bench, and Sanad, having acquired the stationary audience he wanted, proceeded to pace up and down in front of me like a caged animal. There was nothing for it but to listen.

"The firm wants to send me to England for six months," he said. "and Kusum, too, of course. They say I should have gone before but for the war. I've known about it for some time, and this morning Weatherby and I talked about it. I've always wanted to go to England," he continued, "to see what the original is like."

"The original?" I asked.

"The thing of which I'm a carbon copy," he said, sounding so woebegone I had to laugh.

He ignored me. "I've studied English history and literature. I've read the English poets. It's all more real to me than the life I live every day. Don't you see, it has been burned into us, we're branded with it. My body is in India, but my brain doesn't belong here. I might as well be an Englishman except for the colour of my skin."

"An excellent recipe for a divided world," I said. "The more elements that combine to make us, the more integrated we shall be as human beings, with a better understanding of all those elements."

"What nonsense," Sanad said, irritated. "I don't want to forget anything I've been taught. I don't say there's anything wrong with it. I only want to redress the balance. I don't want to feel like a stranger among my own people. If I feel this way now, it'll be much worse in a few years' time. Do

you think I want to become like Uncle Harish, forever reminiscing about the olive he ate in Monte Carlo and the temperature of the wine he drank in Madrid?"

"You won't become like him by going to England for six months, and, as you say, you've always wanted to go there."

"And perhaps I shall some day, but I'm not going yet. Not till I can go as an individual instead of as the carbon copy of an Englishman."

I wondered what Govind Narayan would have to say about his son's refusal to go abroad.

"Do you have any choice in the matter?" I asked.

"Any number of people will scramble to go in my place," he said, sitting down beside me. "Did you know that Sahdev's poems have been published?"

I knew about it. Madan Sahai had given me a copy when I had gone to see him a few days earlier.

"I can't read them myself," said Sanad, "but Kusum has been reading them to me. They don't need much explaining because they're in village dialect. To think I've heard it round me all my life without really listening to it or realizing how beautiful it sounds . . ."

As we walked back to my house, Sanad told me Weatherby was having a cocktail party at the Royal Hotel the next day.

"Will you come? It doesn't matter that you haven't been asked. You don't have to be invited to a cocktail party. There'll be any number of people. And your friends the Granges will be there. So will Vir."

## CHAPTER IV

☞ I AGREED to go to Weatherby's party partly because Sanad insisted and partly because I wanted to acquaint myself with the atmosphere that seemed to disagree with him so much of late. His work aside, he and Kusum did not look happy. I could understand their quarrelling at times, but not the uneasy discontent that seemed to have settled over them. It might have been my imagination, but I decided not to let them drift along in this fashion without trying to find out what was worrying them. My affection for them combined with my incurable curiosity prevented me from ignoring this state of affairs.

Sanad and Kusum came to pick me up, and we drove to the Royal Hotel. The lounge had been cleared for Weatherby's party, and it was apparent that Mrs. Fisher had gone to a good deal of trouble over the elaborate buffet that lined one entire wall. She stood in a strategic position between the kitchen and lounge, supervising the arrangements and keeping the bearers running to and fro with food and drinks.

Weatherby greeted us jovially, told me that any friend of Sanad's was welcome, and handed us drinks. "Have one before it's too late," he said. "There's talk of prohibition in Delhi."

Harilal Mathur, emerging from the crowd, looked visibly pained at this announcement. "They can't do that, Cyril. That would be interfering with civil liberties. At this rate, they will be telling us we must retire to bed early every night."

"Hope not!" exclaimed Weatherby. "Population's quite large enough as it is, what?"

He turned to Vir, who stood beside him, immense and

beatific. I decided Vir was not actually smiling, but that his facial muscles seemed to relax automatically in this manner. In repose he invariably looked as though he was beaming.

"What do you say, Vir? Do you agree with all this prohibition ballyhoo?"

Vir inhaled deeply in preparation for his pronouncement, and the pink carnation in his buttonhole shuddered helplessly on the vast expanse of his black-and-white formal attire.

"I will tell you earnestly, sir," he said. "To me this whisky, it is a joke. You come to my land, and I will show you real drink, man's drink. This soda and whisky is for the old ones."

This remark was greeted by a general guffaw of approval, and on the strength of it Vir drained his glass and happily exchanged it for a full one the bearer brought round.

"Raw alcohol, by Jove. That what you fellows in the Punjab drink?"

"If you drink, then drink properly," Vir intoned. "As a child, sir—"

Sanad made a commotion, spilling his own drink on the floor, in an attempt to nudge Vir into silence. But Vir, after helping his friend to right the damage to his clothes, went on determinedly.

"Even as a child, sir, I did not believe in these weak ways. Straight I went to my father's buffalo and took the milk from her direct. And see me now!"

"By Jove!" Weatherby said, 'astounded.

"And I am nothing," Vir concluded triumphantly. "I am but half my brother!"

The laughter that convulsed his listeners was the greatest tribute Vir could have had. Pleased with himself, he moved off into the crowd.

Weatherby saw Kusum standing by without a drink. "What will you have, Mrs. Shivpal? Er, there's *nimboopani* and tomato juice—"

Kusum interrupted him smoothly. "A gin-and-orange, please."

Weatherby recovered himself sooner than Sanad and myself. "Excellent, excellent," he boomed, signalling a bearer. He handed her the cocktail glass when it arrived. "Well, well," he said, at a loss. "Excellent!"

"I can't believe what you said a moment ago, Cyril," Harilal said. "They can never impose prohibition on the country. Who told you this, Cyril? The Home Minister? But, my dear Cyril, I know him very well, very well indeed. I've known him close on ten years."

His intimate acquaintance with the Home Minister did not satisfy anyone that prohibition would not be introduced.

"What I mean to say is, the man doesn't drink himself, but I've had a drink in his presence. He doesn't object."

"He will if there's prohibition," Weatherby said heavily. "It's not what he thinks. It's the government's programme, like this socialization ballyhoo."

"There's something of that sort going on in England, too, isn't there?" Sanad said.

Weatherby had often told Sanad he did not hold with it in England either. But he must have felt there was no point in dragging the Labour Government into this discussion. "You can't have everything your way," he said. "You can't expect to step up your tourist trade if you start things like prohibition. Look what it's done to Bombay already."

Tom Grange, who had joined us, heartily agreed. "Place isn't what it used to be," he declared emphatically. "I went there for a week last month. Damn near left after a day. The Willingdon Club's as dead as a dodo. Used to be as fine a club as I've seen anywhere. One of the old bearers recognized me. He grinned when he salaamed me and cackled: 'I remember you, sa'ab, and how's memsa'ab?' Jolly good club it used to be, and no better servants anywhere. That old boy knew every member's name."

"The good old days," sighed Harilal.

I was the only person who continually stood alone in my surroundings. The old days, which had for me been full of

hard work, with little time or inclination for pleasure, had for others been a round of gaiety. And the round of gaiety I had now entered was for others a prelude to hard times. I could not get over it.

"Actually," I volunteered, "prohibition would not be new to Asia. Some countries in Asia already have it."

"Asia?" Tom frowned. "My dear chap, don't lump yourselves up that way. It's quite unnecessary."

Unnecessary, and in a sense, unreal. One could, and frequently did, refer to Europe, or the Western World, or even the Great Powers, their treaties and alliances, their blocs, their Way of Life, but that was a different matter. I understood Tom's hesitation at picturing Asia. The thought of all those hordes of Asiatics, I could imagine him saying, wasn't calculated to give one a cosy feeling. Anything might happen if they ever got together. He had once told me that the most idiotic thing the Labour Government had done was to give India her freedom.

"Of course, you chaps were ready for freedom," he reiterated now, "but it started a chain reaction, don't you know, and now there's trouble everywhere. Not only in the British possessions, mind you, though that's bad enough, with troops having to be rushed all over the map to quell uprisings, but even in the places where Britain has an interest, and has always had an interest."

"Always?" I asked.

"Well, from the time we arrived on the scene," he explained. "We just can't keep handing strategic territories over as though they were Christmas presents."

Everyone was talking all at once around us, and we could not hear each other too clearly.

"Asia," Tom repeated. "You know, we Europeans have a long memory. We haven't forgotten the time when the Asiatic hordes swept over Europe. It's not a pleasant thing to be reminded of," and he decided to wash down the phantom of Asia with a stiff one.

"And then Asia hasn't the same meaning as Europe," he went on, fortified. "Tell me frankly if I'm wrong. One can't speak collectively about Asia."

"You're not wrong," I said. "One can't speak that way yet."

"Yet?" He frowned worriedly again.

"Well, the unity of Asia is a dream," I elucidated. "Everything is, at first. The freedom of India was for many of us a dream."

"Dreams!" he said impatiently. "My dear chap, I'm talking about history and geography and all that sort of thing. A common culture and so on."

Dora sat on a settee at the far end of the room. There were other, younger women around her. She was not enjoying the party. Either all the young should be asked to leave, I thought, or all the old; certainly the two should not be allowed to exist side by side at the same cocktail party. Here it was an unkind mixture. The contrast struck me the more because I had known Dora when she was young—never pretty, it's true, but young, and at a time when it had not been necessary to be beautiful to be a social success. It had been necessary only to be English.

I remembered the social round that had dazzled her when she had first arrived in India, the unbelievable thrill of endless hours of leisure. Even when the novelty had palled and she had realized she was meeting the same people time after time, hearing the same conversations—even then, after a drink or two, the conversations had been brighter and the most tedious remarks had had an air of wit and naughtiness about them. It was different now, her attitude told me. No more the days of flirtatious glances and chivalrous attentions. A party was merely a gathering where you ate and drank. It held no exciting promise.

Vir loomed up beside me. He reached Dora's circle before I could. He beamed on everyone, addressed Dora in his usual formal, somewhat pompous way, and stood there like an enor-



mous robot waiting for instructions. In the heat of the room the spicy scent of his carnation, mixing with his rather pungent after-shave lotion, became highly concentrated.

"That was a very nice dinner you gave us the other night," Dora told him. "I enjoyed it immensely."

"Then you must honour me again," said Vir. "Perhaps the coming week?"

"Oh, I'm afraid not. You see, Tom's going to Delhi on Monday, and he'll probably be away the entire week."

"If I can be of help in Mr. Grange's absence . . ."

"That's thoughtful of you, most thoughtful," she said.

Vir's eyes glistened, though whether at the prospect of being of help to Dora or because of the last whisky he had drunk I do not know. Dora, taking out her compact, briskly powdered her nose. She turned to a young matron new to Sharanpur who had been complaining of being bored.

"Life," Dora announced firmly, "is what you make it. I expect you'll find plenty to do. This place is a paradise for any kind of sport. You can ride, golf, go on *shikar*, and then there are trips to Delhi occasionally. Trevor will be going up on business now and then and it'll be a change for you.

"Young people nowadays don't seem to realize how fortunate they are," she said to me. "When I first came out here there really was very little to do. There was no cinema. The Club was half the size it is now, and there wasn't even a pool. We had to rely on our own resources much more. Hugh Carstairs—did you know him? He was Number Two in Reading and Townsend's in those days—Hugh and Margaret were great friends of ours. They dined with us once a week and we dined with them once a week. And Saturday nights and Sunday lunches were regular affairs at the Club, of course. We managed to enjoy ourselves. We had a lot of fun in the old days. I have some very happy memories of India—the Carstairs' parties, the Club, our shoots. . . ."

"Vir," she said, "would you get me a gimlet?"

"It all depends," she continued, "on the friends one makes. We had Hugh and Margaret Carstairs. Then we got a lot of magazines and papers from home. We weren't bored for a minute. These young people have so much more to entertain them."

The swimming-pool and the cinema notwithstanding, it was clear from her expression that Sharanpur had been a better place in her youth.

Someone pressed my arm. I turned to find Kusum, her eyes as bright as the sequins on her sari, a full glass in one hand.

"How many have you had?" I asked her.

"This," she explained thoughtfully, "is for the road. Sanad says we must leave in five minutes. Let's sit down. I want to take my shoes off."

"Why wear uncomfortable shoes?" I scolded, noticing her high heels for the first time.

"Because everybody is so tall," she said. She sipped delicately at her cocktail. "It tastes quite bearable when one gets used to it."

"So would quinine if it were the fashion," I lectured, taking the glass from her and firmly setting it down on the table beside me.

"What would happen if one day the Club caught fire and burned to a cinder?" she reflected cheerfully.

"It would be a sad loss for Sharanpur," I told her. "And why should you want such a dreadful fate to befall the Club? Where would you live?"

"In a tree perhaps," she said with a wistful smile, "or a tent in the fields—or with you."

"I don't believe in living with a young married couple," I told her.

"Then you could move to a tree," she suggested. "Will you have dinner with us tomorrow night?"

"It's time you and Sanad had dinner by yourselves."

"You're not anybody, really. Please come." She sounded almost urgent. She reached across me and picked up her

cocktail again. "Sometimes I feel Sanad and I are so far apart," she said. "I'm so awkward in his world. We have talked about it. . . ."

I had always felt that the less talk there was, the happier the marriage. Sanad with his attempts at analysis and Kusum with her valiant cocktail-drinking and high heels were taking an unnecessarily devious path to happiness.

Sanad would not hear of my going home to dine as we drove back from the party. "Come and have dinner with us at the Club," he said, and I, feeling like the filling in a sandwich, went resignedly with them.

## CHAPTER V

☞ WHEN Govind Narayan's letter arrived asking me to spend the following week-end with him in Lucknow, I was glad to accept. It was some time since I had seen him and Lakshmi, and I looked forward to the contentment of two days with them. But if Govind Narayan and his environment were changeless, I found I was not.

We sat in the rose-garden when the sun had set and it was cool enough to venture out of doors. We drank the same fragrant Darjeeling tea from the same flowered china, and we listened to a symphony of bird sounds as the garden was bathed in a pearl-pink summer glow. In the drawing-room Lakshmi had switched on the radio, and over the air the music of the *sitar* flirted with the insistent beat of the *tabla*. On the main road a jasmine-vendor passed crying his wares and trailing their perfume as he went. It was all the same as it had been long ago, yet I had an inexplicable sensation of emptiness.

Though I leaned back in my low cane chair and, taking off my slippers, let my feet sink into the grass, and watched the stars, white-hot and brilliant, prick through the twilit sky above us, I was restless. It was a peaceful enough setting, and that, I realized, was what was amiss. It was a setting, as picture-perfect as though it had been contrived, not recording in any way the passage of the years.

I heaved myself out of my chair, as though my moving about would inject life into the still-life around me. Govind Narayan did not notice. If a flash of lightning shattered the

silver-barked eucalyptus at the lawn's edge, would he still sit on unconcerned, I wondered. I walked over to the flowerbeds, their neat geometric shapes growing dimmer as darkness gathered. The scent of over-ripe roses assailed me, and as I plucked one, the stem snapped in my hand, scattering the petals in a shower at my feet. I would continue to come to Govind Narayan's, I knew, but not in search of contentment.

Govind Narayan himself seemed untouched by any such reflections as he sat fanning himself with a bamboo fan.

"I have been thinking about the boys' future," he said.

I waited, feeling I had done him an injustice. He did, after all, realize there was a future.

"With all these changes taking place, taxes will go up. I've been considering whether it would not be worth while to get some money out of the country while it is still possible to do so. *Zemindari* will go in a year's time. Once the land is gone, the boys will be left with nothing."

"They are both earning good salaries," I said.

Govind Narayan made an impatient gesture with his fan. "Their salaries will hardly permit them to live in the style to which they are accustomed. They must have something to fall back on. And who knows what further changes will take place? They may want to educate their children abroad. They may want to settle down abroad themselves eventually."

I stared at him, uncomprehending. "For you of all people to say this!" I cried.

"I am not speaking for myself, but for my sons. I have not brought them up to fit into the sort of regime the Congress is ushering in."

No, you have not, I silently agreed, but at least give them the chance to fit into it.

"The boys are young enough to adapt themselves to the changes," I told him.

He did not hear me. He began to tell me of the effect the

loss of his land would have on his income. "The compensation will amount to nothing. It is sheer robbery, and a violation of our most ancient traditions. Could I ever have dreamed my sons would be without this land?"

Talk of the money, I thought, not of the land which you seldom visited, and the boys never. I remembered Ammaji's words: "They do not know what grows on their father's land." They still did not know, and even Govind Narayan's interest in it was relayed through the *munshi*, his flowery-phrased informant.

"Girish and Sanad may need the money later," he went on. "In any event, I should like them to know it is there, should they want it. It can easily be invested abroad. I shall get Trent to advise me."

I think then I came as near to an argument as I have ever come with Govind Narayan. "The British whom you admire did not leave their country to settle in a safer or more comfortable place during the war, or during all the years of austerity that followed. They are still not back on their feet. And so far we are certainly not faced with an austerity regime."

"Nevertheless," he said, "it is the beginning in India of what Sanad calls the age of the Common Man. God only knows where it will lead us. *Zemindari* is going. Next it will be industry. I confess I am not common enough to appreciate this approach."

All this while he had spoken in his usual mild way. Now he said with a vehemence that surprised me: "What I cannot tolerate is the filth! Lucknow used to be a clean city. Do you know I found banana peel outside the gates of Government House? Could it have happened in the old days? You haven't driven around the city lately. The refugees are pouring in from the Punjab and setting up shops, stalls really, on every available bit of ground. An unmannerly lot if ever I encountered any. I give courtesy and I expect at least a semblance of it from others."

My poor Govind Narayan, I thought, do you really expect

to sup off froth alone? Let the frothy trifle end your meal, round it out to perfection, but it cannot take the place of the whole meal. There has to be one course that will require chewing if it is to nourish the body as well as please the senses.

"Let us dine out here," said Govind Narayan. "It is the only time one gets out of doors in this weather."

Standard lamps were brought, a revolving fan to clear the air of insects, and small tables. Lakshmi joined us as the *thals* arrived and were placed on the tables. I was used to a light supper, and found the food before me too rich. Govind Narayan, always a careful eater despite his lavish table, hardly touched it himself. But the number of *katoris* on the *thal* could never be lessened. Once Lakshmi, discovering Govind Narayan ate less and less, had had fewer dishes made, but he had been annoyed. "I like to see the food there even if I don't eat it. Surely it has not come to the point where we must economize on the food we eat."

"No, of course not," Lakshmi had said, "but there's no point in having so much cooked when we don't eat it. I hate to see it wasted."

"In a self-respecting household, food *should* be wasted," he had said with a rare touch of asperity. "I will not have every dish removed from the table as though it had been licked clean by a starving waif."

There was no danger of that. His *thal* and mine were taken away almost untouched, though Lakshmi enjoyed her meal and did not pretend otherwise. She had put on weight steadily in the last few years, and she was the only person I knew who could continue to do so without its detracting from her good looks.

Fruit plates were placed before us. A servant brought mangoes and melons on a tray, the golden-skinned, honey-sweet melons that were the summer specialty of Lucknow, and we all helped ourselves.

"How are Kusum and Sanad?" Lakshmi asked. "They

should have come with you. I have hardly seen anything of Kusum. What do you think of her?"

"She reminds me of you," I said.

"Of me?" Lakshmi sounded doubtful. In her youth she had been considered a beauty, and Kusum was not beautiful.

"Not her looks," I amended, "but her nature. She is very feminine."

Lakshmi's forehead puckered. "Can you think that?" she puzzled. "It doesn't seem so to me at all. Only today I was going through all the things she has sent back here to me, things I gave her at her wedding—clothes, ornaments, for her house, and one or two really lovely carpets. I cannot understand a young woman not being interested in beautiful things."

"They have little room at the Club for all those things," I said. "Perhaps when they have a house of their own . . ."

I was echoing Kusum's own words. "These two rooms are hardly a home," she had said to me. "When we get a house of our own we can take out all the expensive things."

The expensive things, she called them, not the beautiful or the valuable. The rooms she and Sanad occupied at the Club were not a real home, it was true, but soon enough they had become home to her, bearing evidences of her excursions to out-of-the-way stalls in the bazaar. She had bought striped straw matting for the floors, saying that it was cooler than carpets. In a corner of the sitting-room she had set up a big earthen jar finger-painted with an exuberant design. She had lined the mantelpiece with a procession of painted clay figures—jade-green parrots with ruby beaks, impossibly vivid village belles, bright gods and goddesses. On the walls she had hung brilliant cloth squares of bead- and mirror-work. All as transient, as easily soiled and broken as a child's toys, and just as easily replaced. Lakshmi would not have understood this. A home had to be planned with careful forethought, built up object by valuable object, furnished with costly,



permanent furniture, adorned with works of art, and handed down intact from generation to generation.

"When is Veena coming back?" I asked.

Veena had for the past year been working as an announcer on All-India Radio. She had gone to Delhi recently to audition for a job. If she got the job, it would keep her in Delhi for a year. Govind Narayan minded this less than he might have because Harish was now posted to Delhi, and Veena, if she qualified, would live with her uncle and aunt.

"She should be here tomorrow," said Lakshmi.

Veena came back just two hours before I was to leave for Sharanpur, and flung herself at me as though she were still a six-year-old. "Oh, you're not going! Not yet! Well, if you must, then take me to tea before you go."

We went to Claudette's, where I had so often taken her and her brothers, but it was the old Claudette's no longer. No more the dainty tea cakes and cream buns. The glass-topped tables had been carelessly wiped, and stains had dried on them. The bearer who brought our tea slopped some of it on to the table. A few threads of meat between slices of bread reminded us that we had ordered chicken sandwiches. Claudette's had lost its European clientele, and its morale had disintegrated with the loss. I wondered how Veena would react to her changed surroundings. Would they repel her as they did her father, or distress her as they did Sanad?

"Chicken," she remarked cheerily, "was never my favourite meat. Most people order it from sheer swank, you know, not because they like it. It's supposed to be the thing to do."

Her schoolgirl expressions contrasted sharply with her svelte appearance.

"Let's order some Indian sweets, shall we?" I offered.

They came, unwholesomely greasy, heavily fried, rolling in stale syrup. The old ways had gone, and the new had not yet come. Veena made a face, and I sent the sweets away.

"Well," she sighed, "Claudette's didn't produce perfect cream buns the day it was built. For all we know, this place

might be worth coming to in a few years' time when they've got the menu properly established."

I congratulated her on her common sense and apologized for the failure of the tea.

"Never mind," she said. "Let's go to the zoo. We can walk around and have a talk."

"In this heat?" I said, but I was glad she had suggested it. I wanted to know what she was doing with herself. She had grown into an attractive, vivacious young woman, as pert and assured as the child I had known. But she was no child now. Her sari, of some clinging blue material, moulded itself to her figure. Her brief blouse left a good deal of slender brown waist bare.

"Have you ever been to Delhi?" she asked me.

"Not for years. How did you like it?"

She hugged herself ecstatically. "It is wonderful. Being there is like watching the beginning of something."

"But I'm told it is very dirty now. Connaught Place is crowded with refugees and flies."

"Yes, but what does it matter? It's one's own, isn't it, and that's what makes it so exciting. One can have an ugly child, but it's one's very own."

We bought cones of roasted peanuts to feed the animals.

"This beginning you feel you are watching, do you ever want to do more than watch it?" I asked.

"You mean, do I like everything that is happening?" she said.

It was not exactly what I meant, but I let her go on.

"There are some things I don't like, but what has liking or disliking a thing have to do with it? It's happening. The point is to try and understand it. Either condemning it or gloating over it is a silly waste of time."

"And how do you go about understanding it?"

"Not by tying myself into knots about it as Sanad does," she said, "nor by behaving as though I were an Englishman marooned among savages, like Girish."

We laughed, and the monkeys, attracted by our laughter, chattered excitedly as they scrambled for peanuts.

"It's so much a question each person must decide for himself," said Veena. "If I looked like Kunti Behen, for instance, I would probably have a grudge against the world, too, and want to hammer the joy out of existence."

Kunti Behen had become the most vocal M.L.A. in our province. Her ceaseless campaign against the evils of smoking, drinking, meat-eating, and getting vaccinated against disease made her a most formidable politician.

"You know, if the urge to do something is there," Veena went on with surprising wisdom, "one doesn't flounder for long. And if one continues to flounder, it means the time isn't ripe yet or it's not a real urge. We aren't all born to do things. And it's no disgrace if we can't."

I asked her how Harish and Maya were. I had wondered a good deal about Harish since Independence. He was now a Secretary in the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. A Secretary at last, the rung next to the top of the ladder, only to find that the man above him was a *dhotiwalla*. Harish was like the man who took a circuitous route home to avoid meeting an unpleasant acquaintance, only to find the unwelcome creature not merely awaiting him, but in full possession of his house. A dismal homecoming indeed!

"Uncle Harish grumbles a lot," said Veena. "He says in the old days he used to leave his office at five sharp and have his game of billiards before going on to the Club. He doesn't leave the office till seven now. But I don't think he'd be happy if he didn't have something to grumble about. He says if it weren't for the I.C.S. this country would have gone Communist after Independence."

"And your aunt?"

"Aunt Maya is working on one of the Rehabilitation Committees. She's away all day in a refugee camp. I went with her once, but never again. I couldn't bear the thought of seeing people who had suffered so much and been deprived of

so much. We aren't all made the same way, I suppose. Aunt Maya goes about her work so cool and composed. They love her."

"Well, darling," I told her, "I must go back to the house and collect my suitcase and then be off to the station. I hope you'll soon hear that your audition was successful."

"Oh, I hope so, too," she said eagerly. "I should love to live in Delhi. What a wonderful time to be alive!"

Unthinkingly she crumpled the empty paper cone she was carrying and let it fall to the ground.

I shook my head reproachfully. "Veena, Veena, you would never have done that in the old days."

She picked it up, laughing, and we found a garbage container for it.

She came to see me off at the station, looking cool and trim. She kept waving till her fluttering blue sari had become a speck in the distance. I lowered the dust-shutters and sat back, thinking of the slim, strong hand that had squeezed mine, and the gay, confident voice. Veena was the very opposite of Claudette's with its melancholy indecision between the old ways and the new. Here was a young woman, forthright and candid, who would never be bowled over by sentiment or buried in outworn tradition, but who would passionately cherish what was her own just because it was hers. Service had many meanings, I had found. It could spring from duty or inspiration. But here was service in its purest form, born of love.

## CHAPTER VI

☞ VILLAGE INDUSTRIES WEEK was to begin in the sizzling heat of May. A fair was to be held, including an exhibition of hand-made products and a spinning display, and every night there was to be a festival of folk dancing. The polo grounds had been requisitioned for the entire show, and there were some murmurings at the Club regarding this measure.

"It's not democratic," Harilal protested. "The polo grounds have never been used for anything but polo. The whole road from here to the grounds has been cordoned off. They can't do that."

"They've done it," I pointed out.

He looked at me as though I were personally responsible for his having to take a longer route from his house to the Club. "I know the District Magistrate extremely well," he said curtly. "I shall mention the matter to him."

"He can hardly be unaware of the matter, since he must have passed the requisitioning order himself."

"You must admit there'll be the most God-awful row till all hours of the night," Tom said.

"Well, folk dancing is apt to be noisy," I said, "but it is a national event of sorts. A similar Week is being organized in every part of the country. This is only the first."

"Why the first here?" Tom wondered. "The U.P. has been incredibly backward in some respects, compared with the rest of India."

"I suppose that may be why the U.P. Government wants to be the first to promote village goods. That's probably why they have chosen Sharanpur instead of Lucknow for its venue

—to show that cottage industry has a place in an industrial economy. This being a textile centre, the spinning display should be of special interest to the public. It's not too far-fetched to suppose that one day—oh, in the very distant future, of course—hand-spun cloth may even seriously rival the mills."

Harilal gave a little laugh that I can only describe as condescending.

"Balance is the answer," Tom said. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I think there's a tendency to go all in one direction. Prohibition, village goods—it's all very well up to a point, you know. Take this requisitioning order, for example. I'm told that fella who's head of the Village Board here just went over to the D.M.'s place and got him to pass the order. Over a cup of tea."

"Exactly," Harilal said bitterly. "One simply hasn't got access any more."

"I thought you knew the D.M. very well," I said, surprised.

"I do," he snapped. "Having lived here all my life, there isn't a single official I don't know, but the point is officialdom hasn't the meaning it used to have. Any Tom, Dick, or Harry didn't have access to officials before. All I said before, and I repeat, is that it's not democratic. How do we know the Club won't be taken over next for this kind of thing?"

"Oh, well," I soothed him, "it's only for a week. You'll be going to the exhibition, won't you?"

"I'll put in an appearance, yes. One has to patronize these affairs."

Harilal's appearance on the opening evening in a sky-blue Cadillac, accompanied by his wife, caused a mild sensation. Camera bulbs flashed, and the local correspondent of the *Illustrated Journal* noted that Lady Mathur looked fetching in an intriguing shade of pink as she mingled with the fashionable throng. My cousin Sheela told me about it later. I had always thought Lady Mathur a rather silly young creature. She had not half the personality of Prabha. Prabha, I guessed, if

she went at all, would go once the rush of visitors had subsided, so that there would be no necessity to stop and speak to people. She would not want to embarrass her husband. I did not go on the opening evening myself, for I wanted to enjoy myself, and this would not have been possible in a crowd. But at night the distant tattoo of drums and the clapping of many hands reached me.

That night I lay awake, listening to it. It was too hot to sleep. Once or twice I got up and sprinkled my bed-sheet with water, but the heat baked it dry in no time. I discarded the notion of sleep and decided to take a walk through the Botanical Gardens. My clock had stopped, so I had no idea of the time, but, stepping into the lane outside my cottage, I noticed that the card-players who gathered regularly every evening and played till past eleven were no longer there. It must have been midnight or later, moonless and still.

I strolled along, unrefreshed and aimless, my eyes getting accustomed very gradually to the blackness. The drums of the fair had stopped, and the night vibrated with the croaking of crickets and the hoarse orchestra of frogs. I stumbled against a soft object that thudded rapidly away from my foot and I guessed it must be a water rat in search of moisture. It was a night of strange sounds, so when I heard a woman's strange laugh not far from me, it startled me only for an instant. I had heard her laugh in daylight and often in a drawing-room, but the sound I heard now had nothing to do with either, restrained as they had been by other voices, other faces, and the polite circumstances that must have made her laugh. Here, disembodied, it had a furtive quality, blending into the nocturnal choir. Dora must have been only a few yards from me, just off the road in the direction of the pond. Then, as if the heat had exhausted its intensity, a faint breeze rippled the branches overhanging the road, and the spicy scent of carnations drifted past me. I retreated to my cottage, resigned to a sleepless night.

The reception held by the Village Industries Board at the

Club for Lady Lalita Chatterji was attended by most of Sharanpur. It was, consequently, an ill-assorted mixture of people. The Chatterjis' own personal friends and acquaintances were there, and a host of people connected with village work. A good deal of tomato juice was in evidence and a lot of vegetarian snacks. It must have been the first function of its kind at the Sharanpur Club.

Harilal followed Sir Ronu Chatterji about possessively, presenting guests to him. I was sure he did not like Ronu nearly so much as he wished people to believe. They had been together at Oxford and had not known each other very well there. Since then, Ronu's career had been spectacularly successful. In addition, he was a social success, a host whose splendid table and gift—as a clever raconteur found ample scope in the international set he entertained in Calcutta. The British paid him the compliment of calling him the sort of chap one could do business with—spoke one's own language and understood one's ways. In contrast, Harilal felt very much the petty small-town businessman, and he knew that his name and reputation would never extend much beyond the boundaries of Sharanpur, for all his magnanimous gestures. However, if there was one Indian he admired and sought to emulate, it was Ronu, who had achieved with an enviable ease all that Harilal still hankered after. It was some consolation to be able to say nonchalantly whenever the opportunity arose: "Sir Ronu? My dear fellow, I know him very well. Very well indeed. We were at Oxford together, you know. Only the other day when I was in Calcutta I stayed with him."

Lalita, sipping orange juice, sat in a place of honour surrounded by a circle of admirers. At forty-eight she still retained her slim, youthful figure, the envy of many a Calcutta debutante.

Harilal went up to her table. "I have been commissioned by Tom to look after you." He smiled. "May I offer you a sherry or a cocktail? You must be tired of orange juice."



Lalita shook her head. "Absolutely not, Harilal."

"But you used to take an occasional drink."

She regarded him gravely. "It is amazing, the things one can do without, Harilal. You know, our lives are cluttered with the most unnecessary things—really unnecessary to one's inner self, that is. Since I gave up even the little occasional drink I used to have, you can't imagine what it's done for me."

Harilal listened respectfully. Lalita, besides being beautiful, was a woman of some intellect. She was admired as much for this as she was imitated in other ways. Poor Harilal. All the good things of life had been so bountifully bestowed on Ronu, and the chief among them, this jewel of a wife.

"I used to miss going abroad," she went on. "Would you believe it, last year I didn't so much as go to the hills for a month or even a week? And the heat didn't worry me for a minute. It just goes to show," she finished with an expressive gesture of her beringed fingers.

Harilal gazed at her with a longing look I had seen only on a spaniel's face when it looked wistfully at a titbit just out of reach. "You're marvellous, simply marvellous," he said.

He turned to go, and I followed him.

"Is she going into politics, by any chance?" I asked.

"How should I know?" he said. "It's much too early to say. There won't be any elections for years. But she's wonderfully talented. It would be a pity if she didn't."

"A great pity," I murmured. "She's so ornamental besides being talented. Those eyes . . ."

"What the devil do you mean?"

"We have our share of able politicians, but I am positive there are very few ornamental ones among them."

"No," said Harilal. "Quite." He was not sure whether I was serious, but was mollified because my remark had not been derogatory to Lalita. "Have you been introduced to her?" he asked me.

"No," I said, and as he prepared to do me the honour, "but don't trouble. There are so many people here who want to meet her, while it is a pleasure for me just to look at her."

Harilal left me with an uneasy backward glance, and I looked about for Ronu, wondering if he would remember me. I found him in the bar. Not gifted with his wife's adaptability, he felt much more at home with his accustomed whisky-and-soda in one hand, a long cigar in the other. Sanad was with him. Ronu's politely unchanging expression told me that he did not recognize me, but he greeted me cordially. He was famous for his charm and his excellent memory, as great a success in the drawing-room as in the conference-room. Noting Sanad's arm about my shoulder, and my *dhoti-kurta*, he plunged into appropriate conversation. He congratulated me on the success of the reception and asked if I had not been overburdened with the arrangements for the exhibition. After several futile attempts to disclaim all responsibility for either function, which he jovially put down to modesty on my part, I stopped protesting.

"Ronu was just saying," said Sanad, "that he thinks the country is going ahead too fast, attempting too many changes too soon."

"I don't understand the yardstick," said Ronu. "I simply don't understand it." He spoke in a confidential manner that gave his every utterance a profound significance. "There's no method to the way things are going. Let's leave the business side of it for the moment, since you"—he turned to me—"will say I can't be objective where my own interests are affected, ha, ha, ha! Take another instance: we're dispensing with the English language, simply dispensing with it."

"Not at once," I reminded him. "Over a period of fifteen years."

"My dear fellow, will fifteen years change the world? Will the English language be any less important than it is now?" He paused, looking as he must have when he made an important announcement to his annual shareholders' meeting.

"Could you and I communicate with each other but for the English language? Can you speak Bengali? Do I speak Hindi or Urdu?"

"We could learn," I suggested.

"Now, that is just what I mean," he explained patiently. "Why waste time learning each other's language when we both speak English? It's so impractical. . . . Never mind the language controversy, we're doing away with any number of institutions. We're playing ducks and drakes with the future education of our children," he confided. "Whatever you may have had against the British, you must admit they provided us with a sound education—"

"But one that didn't have much relation to our surroundings," I interrupted.

"British education," Ronu went on smoothly, "is not a system, it is an institution, a tradition, proved over hundreds of years. We can't discard it overnight. We can't afford to."

A burst of clapping reached us from the reception-room. I thought Ronu would want to return and listen to the speeches, but he ordered another round of drinks.

"Lalita's show," he explained indulgently. "I don't want to butt in. I'll go in later when she starts speaking."

"I didn't know Lalita was keen on cottage industries," said Sanad, and added with the candour of the young: "This must be something new, all this village-consciousness. In the old days she wouldn't have known a village product from a champagne cocktail."

"My dear Sanad, it's a mania with her," said Ronu. "You know Lalita—she never does anything by halves. She's made this cottage-industry thing a sort of crusade. You ought to see the house now. It's been redone. I haven't got used to it yet. I keep thinking I've walked into the wrong house."

"I hope that portrait of hers is still in the salon," said Sanad, "the wicked-looking one."

Ronu had to think a minute to place the portrait. His wife had been painted so many times. "No, it's somewhere in the

godown. She didn't like it much. Somehow it didn't seem to go with the hand-loomed curtains and all the other changes."

"Drink up and let's have another before I have to go back and listen to the speeches," he continued. "By the way, Sanad, how much longer are you going to be stuck in Sharanpur? You've been here since you began service, haven't you? Isn't it time you came to Calcutta? I saw John Trent only the other day. He spoke well of you."

"I like it here," Sanad said. "There's plenty of work and not too much protocol. Calcutta wouldn't suit me. I was to have gone there after I got married, but I told them I preferred to stay on here."

This was news to me.

"You've got to go there some time, my dear boy. You're on your way up, you know. You can't stick in a backwater like Sharanpur all these important years. You'll never be heard of. Look at Girish. He's doing splendidly. He's being sent abroad soon. With due respect to you," Ronu said, turning to me, "what is there to do in Sharanpur?"

"There isn't much," Sanad replied for me, "so I thought I'd take up spinning."

Ronu's face registered a well-bred question mark.

"Just for something to do, you know," Sanad said, "an indoor sport. One can't play tennis all the time."

"Oh, I see," Ronu said. "Ha, ha, jolly good. I must remember that."

Sanad grinned at me. "Does it take long to learn?"

"It will take you years," I retorted, looking at his large hands. "You've never held anything finer than a tennis racquet."

"I've held a pen from time to time," Sanad said cheerfully.

"As little as possible, I'm sure," I said, "probably just long enough to sign your name."

Ronu looked from Sanad to me in a bewildered fashion.

"Think of it, Ronu, I shall be the first employee of Selkirk

and Lowe to learn how to spin," Sanad said with satisfaction. "That will be a distinction in itself, don't you see? After all, the firm claims to be a part of the life of this country. We've got to keep up with all that's going on. Why shouldn't spinning be considered an accomplishment and an asset like tennis-playing, for instance, or being able to hold your drink?"

Ronu was beginning to have grave doubts as to whether Sanad was able to hold his. "My dear boy, next you'll suggest we all turn up at our offices in *dhotis*!"

"Why ever not? In another ten or twenty years we might well be doing just that. It would be much cooler than a suit. And, after all," Sanad added with an air of having come to an inescapable conclusion after months of deliberation, "we're Indians."

"Ha, ha!" said Ronu, as he paid for the drinks. "Ha, ha, ha!" He put an arm around Sanad and thumped him vigorously on the back. "Jolly good, jolly good!" he said. "Well, I've got to join the others. Will you excuse me? You must make up your mind to come to Calcutta, young man. There's no future in the provinces."

"Harish was wrong," I said after Ronu had gone. "Straw matting has come into its own."

"What's all this about straw matting?" asked Sanad.

"It doesn't matter. Let's go and listen to Lady Chatterji's speech."

Sanad and I stood in the doorway to the reception room while the President of the Village Industries Board requested silence so that he could welcome Lady Chatterji in our midst. The President was an agreeable-looking individual, shorter than myself, and dressed like me in *dhota-kurta*. He seemed to have a twitch in one leg because he shuffled it continuously as he spoke, and he spoke rapid but picturesque English with an accent that must surely have made Sir Charles Kittering and his illustrious forebears writhe in their graves.

He welcomed Lady Chatterji as the person who had done more than anybody else to revive cottage industry in Bengal,

and whose own home was a monument to the arts and crafts of the villages. I listened with interest as he told us how she had shown that Indian fabrics and designs, and even the humblest products of an Indian village, could be used to advantage in the furnishing and decoration of a house. But for her enthusiastic patronage, the movement might never have achieved such spectacular results in Bengal. "And, as we all know," he reminded us, "Bengal is the artistic centre of India, and has long led us in these matters."

Lady Chatterji's answering speech was becomingly modest.

"I thank you all for coming here to welcome me this evening, and Mr. President for the kind words he has spoken about me, which are quite undeserved. As our Prime Minister has so inspiringly put it, 'We must unite in the great adventure of building India.' What I have done and shall continue to do for our villages is little enough toward this goal."

Lalita's glance flickered round the room and came to rest on Sanad, tall, broad-shouldered, lounging in the doorway. She recognized him instantly, though he had changed in the six years since she had seen him. For one enchanted moment her eyes held what Sanad had once called her "witch-look," rejecting the roomful of people, deliberately isolating him for her sorcery—but only for a moment. Quickly she returned to her surroundings, and as the applause rang out she was the distinguished patron of cottage industry once again.

## CHAPTER VII

☞ GENTLY, almost imperceptibly, the era of cottage industry had come into its own, with the spinning-wheel symbolizing the dignity of the hand-made article. I did not spin so regularly as I had done in the old days. Somewhat guiltily I recalled my last prison term, when Sohan Bhai and I, fellow prisoners, had spent so much of our time spinning. I had been thinking of Sohan Bhai a great deal since the Village Industries Fair had begun. I half expected to come across him at the fair, so it was no surprise to find him in the spinning section, sitting on a mat in front of his *charkha*, along with the others in the roped-in enclosure. It did surprise me to find Sanad sitting beside him, his left hand wrestling with the delicate trick of keeping the newly spun thread from snapping while his right hand turned the wheel. Sanad, as I have noted before, looked absurd seated on the floor. His knees jutted upward at an awkward angle, while his shiny shoes and the crease of his trousers were out of place among the bare feet and homespun clothing. The sight was so ludicrous that I laughed out loud.

Sohan Bhai looked up from his work, saw me, and smiled. He said nothing in greeting. We might have parted just yesterday, or a few hours earlier. His warm smile re-established the companionship of our prison days.

"Come and join us," he invited. "This section is open to all who want to learn or practise spinning."

I declined. "I find it more entertaining to watch your zealous pupil."

"Everyone seems to," said Sohan Bhai. "The first day he collected quite a crowd. There was an Englishman, very large

and determined-looking, who was quite dismayed by the sight."

"Weatherby," Sanad explained. "He stood just where you're standing and roared: 'What in thunder are you doing?' I told him I was learning to spin, and he said: 'I've got eyes, damn you!'"

"You should have asked him to join you," I said.

"I don't think he would have liked that," Sanad said, "but I did say there was nothing extraordinary about my learning to spin. I told him that if this were a fun fair and this enclosure a place where one practised target-shooting or archery, it would be nothing to get excited about, would it? He said quite a lot of irrelevant things in reply. Anyway, I am going to Calcutta."

"When?" I asked. "And why?" Sanad stood up and mopped his forehead.

"Sohan Bhai," he said, "sticking a charging pig is simpler than learning how to spin. I think I've had enough for the time being. Would you care to join us for a cup of tea?"

"No, thank you," Sohan Bhai said. "I shall carry on here."

Sanad and I strolled through the grounds. I was eager to look at the exhibits, but I realized they would mean little to Sanad. I decided to look around by myself on another evening. The tea tent was nearly empty, and we sat down with cups of milky tea.

"My contract has to be renewed," said Sanad. "I would have had to go to Calcutta in any case. But Weatherby says I should go now. He's unhappy about me. Not about anything I've done, just my attitude. I think he feels that talking to Trent might make things right. So I'm leaving tomorrow."

"You should have called on Dora," I said. "It's the little things that count. She is a leader of Sharanpur society."

"She has the morals of an alley cat," Sanad said rather rudely. "I have no intention of calling on her."

"Are you in a position to criticize anybody's morals?" I asked.



"No. But I'm not a leader of society," he said.

There was no getting the better of Sanad.

"This spinning business," I began. "Must you learn it in public for all of Sharanpur to see when you know it distresses the Company?"

"I know I'm conspicuous in these clothes," Sanad said. "The day Weatherby shouted at me and said I was making a monkey out of myself, I went over to your place. You were out, but your servant took out a *pyjama-kurta* of yours for me to try on. It was much too small. I would have looked a clown in it. So I had to resign myself to my own clothes. Later on I shall get a *pyjama-kurta* made for myself."

"That, of course, answers my question," I said.

He looked honestly puzzled. "Why does everyone worry so much about answers? It's the questions and all the facets they present that I'm learning to appreciate. Answers belong in heaven. It's what I shall try and explain to Trent."

"Well, let me know if Trent appreciates your explanation," I said dryly.

Sanad spent five days in Calcutta. It was a peaceful five days for me. Kusum and I explored the fair and admired the exhibits. I persuaded Sohan Bhai to move from the Royal Hotel to my cottage, and we renewed our friendship. Every evening after the fair closed we sat in my garden, drinking cool buttermilk, while he told me of all that had happened to him since we had last met. He had gone to Bengal after his release from prison.

"I felt I could be of some use there," he said. "I joined the Ramakrishna Mission in its famine-relief work. I was there for two years. Why does it take a catastrophe to make one realize something obvious?"

I did not reply. I had the feeling he was speaking of these things for the first time, and I wanted him to unravel his story in peace.

"It took the Bihar earthquake to make me aware there were

people besides myself who had suffered. It took the famine to make me see that I had been running away from the past. I cannot describe to you the sights I saw during the famine. It is enough to say I had not seen tragedy on such a scale since Bihar. There, too, it had been a devastation of human life, but this was a slow rotting not only of the body but of the human spirit. The degradation starvation can heap upon a man, the terrible demoralization of every fibre of his being, every impulse that makes him human! I thought I should never forget the horror of it, yet already I can talk of it calmly and it does not oppress me.

"After the worst of it was over," he went on, "I wondered where to go and what to do. It was perhaps cowardly of me, but I wanted to get away from the debris of the famine and cleanse my spirit somehow before starting on some other work. On an impulse I decided to return to Patna. I had not set foot there, as you know, after my wife and children were killed in the earthquake. But I had an overpowering urge to go. I felt I would not regain my peace of mind anywhere else. It is strange how we are led at times.

"I went home, or to the place where my home had once been. I walked around that area, waiting for the old sense of desolation to sweep over me again. But it didn't. Instead, I felt a renewal of courage, for what reason I shall never know. But the feeling was a strong and compelling one, as though I had been temporarily blind and my sight miraculously restored. It was uncanny. The ghosts I dreaded did not haunt me again. I felt as if all the burdens of living had dropped off and left me whole again. And I knew that, though I might go on my travels from time to time, my home and work would be in Patna as they had been before. I had run away, trying to destroy the memory of happier days. It had done me great harm. I had succeeded only in burying it deep under layers of discipline. I think I cried whole-heartedly that first night I spent in Patna. Since then I have been living there, and I have a home for children orphaned in the Ben-

gal famine. There are only twenty-two children at present, but the number will grow. I think of it as a memorial to my family. Surely they deserved a memorial of some kind rather than oblivion."

This man had had the power to heal by his words and his presence when I had first met him. How much more he must have now that he had really come to terms with himself! All the energy once spent in subduing his own sorrow and bitterness must now flow from him in abundant measure, a staff of strength to those around him. Combined with this was the knowledge he had acquired about rural India on his wanderings. There must be few men who knew as much about village conditions as he did.

"I am surprised," I said, "that the Government has not seen fit to utilize your fund of knowledge about the rural areas."

"They invited me to serve on a Commission," he admitted, "but I refused. I should not have been free to carry on my own work, and I should have had to live in Delhi."

"If everybody felt as you do," I said, "we should have no experienced people to guide us."

"You may be sure everybody will not feel as I do," he said, smiling, and I was inclined to agree with him.

When Sanad and Kusum came to see me on his return from Calcutta I thought they looked happier than I had seen them for a long time. They were holding hands, though Kusum surreptitiously uncurled her hand from his as they entered my garden.

"Am I speaking to an ex-employee of Selkirk and Lowe?" I asked.

"No, of course not," Sanad said, surprised.

Trent, I knew, was a man of firm convictions. I wondered how he and Sanad had worked out a compromise.

"We had several talks in the office," Sanad said, "and we drew up my contract. It was very satisfactory. I couldn't have

asked for better terms. Trent said he'd had consistently good reports of me since I had joined the firm. He liked my work, he liked the profits our Sharanpur branch showed, he said I had a flair and was a businessman to my fingertips."

"And after that," I cut in, "the two of you took your seven steps around the sacred fire and the priest declared you man and wife."

Sanad laughed uproariously. "You're so impatient," he said. "I am telling you everything as it happened."

"We had all our business discussions in the office, as I've told you. Then, the evening before I left, Trent asked me to drop in at his flat and have a drink with him. I knew he wanted to have a talk with me or he wouldn't have asked me so informally. He said it would not be a party, just him and myself. I went there at about seven o'clock. Mrs. Trent was in the hills. There wasn't even a servant in sight except the one who answered the door and then disappeared. The drinks were on a trolley. We sat on a balcony overlooking the front drive."

"We had several drinks and talked about the work. Then he made enquiries about my family and Kusum. He was very affable. Finally he got on to the subject of traditions."

" 'You know, Sanad,' he said, 'one can talk to an Indian about tradition. It's something he understands and appreciates. You people could teach the world a thing or two about it. It's something we British respect, too. In fact, I think a healthy respect for tradition is a fairly sound measure of a man's character.' "

"What were you doing all this while," I asked Sanad, "sitting there mesmerized?"

"No. I was drinking," he said. " 'Take Selkirk and Lowe,' Trent went on. 'We're not the oldest British business in this country, but we date fairly far back. Our first office was set up nearly a hundred years ago. Now, that in itself may not mean much, but the fact remains that during the past century we have built up certain traditions we are justifiably proud of."

We have set up certain standards we like to see upheld. I say we've set up these things. That is not precisely what I mean. Certain standards and traditions grow up automatically around established institutions, and in the long run they provide a sort of moral backbone for the institution. One's regard for the institution can generally be judged by the degree of one's adherence to these. You're a young man. This may strike you as stuffy, but I am of the opinion that a degree of uniformity is necessary to the functioning of any enterprise. Do we agree?"

"I nodded my head. I was beginning to feel a bit dizzy from the drinks I'd had.

"Then he said: 'A provincial posting can get very tiresome, Sanad. One comes up against all sorts of minor irritations, and one is much more apt to injure pride and that sort of thing in a small town than in a city of this size. The same thing happens at home. Weatherby seems to think a change would do you good. We don't want you getting stale in a backwater, you know. You've got to come here some day. I think it's time now.'

" 'If you're satisfied with my work, Mr. Trent, I would far rather stay in Sharanpur,' I replied. 'I know the whole area under our charge extremely well. Our dealers know me.'

" 'I know, and I've taken all that into consideration. It's your own advancement I'm thinking of. You're refusing to go to England. I don't understand your reasons.'

"Then," Sanad told me, "I gave him my reasons. I told him about my desire to discover my country a little before I went abroad. I told him Kusum was teaching me Hindi and that I was learning how to spin. I might as well have announced I had danced in the nude on the rooftops of Sharanpur. Trent didn't look shocked, but he looked gravely disturbed, as though I wasn't quite well.

" 'When you first walked into my office six years ago,' he said sombrely, 'I realized you were a young man of spirit, and I liked you for it. I'm a shrewd judge of character, Sanad, and

I haven't often been wrong. In you I knew we had someone whose very independence and ability to make decisions would make him a valuable addition to our office. I admire a man with guts.'

"Meanwhile," Sanad told me, "I was wondering what all this had to do with learning to spin or taking Hindi lessons. Finally he got to the point and asked me if I thought these pastimes were strictly necessary.

" 'I'm a great believer in behaving as befits one's position, Sanad,' he said. 'Now, here again you might say I'm a stuffy old man, but in the long run it pays. There's nothing to be gained by stepping outside the bounds of one's own position—nothing but a temporary sensationalism, and I'm sure you're above that. Mind you, there's nothing to stop you doing anything you want to, but what would be the point of doing anything that took you so far from your work and interests and the sort of people you ought properly to associate with? There's nothing to prevent me from conducting a local dance band—in fact, I might tell you it's always been a secret wish of mine—but what would be the purpose beyond making a fool of myself?'

" 'I can think of another purpose,' I told him.

" 'What's that?' he asked. 'Here, have another drink.'

"He filled my glass and his own.

" 'You'd be doing something you'd always wanted to,' I said, 'instead of nursing a frustration.'

" 'My dear Sanad, when you're as old as I am—and I realize it won't be for a good long time—you will understand that frustrations are an inevitable part of living. Civilization is full of frustrations. Only the savages are completely uninhibited.'

" 'The question of my learning my own language or how to spin isn't one of inhibitions,' I pointed out, 'or of doing something sensational. I should genuinely like to learn. And, apart from this, if an employee of Selkirk and Lowe learned to spin, it would be in keeping with the Company's back-

ground as well as in tune with recent trends in this country. I can't see anything wrong with it. It might inject new life into the firm. After all, Mr. Trent, India is changing. It isn't what it was a hundred years ago, and some of the firm's traditions must adjust themselves, too, if the firm is going to serve any purpose here at all.'

"When I had said all this," said Sanad, "I suddenly realized I'd said rather a lot. I wondered how he would react, but we'd both drunk rather a lot, and he wasn't my boss just then. He took it in good part, but he was a bit surprised.

" 'Mind you,' he repeated, 'I'm not objecting to your activities. I'm merely trying to understand your attitude. Why do you suddenly find them necessary?'

"I saw that there was some justice in his remark. He, and Selkirk and Lowe, and all the life the two of them represented were what they had always been. Nothing had happened to change them. It was I who had changed, for so many reasons. I had entered a different world altogether, one my father had certainly not expected me to enter. And it had affected me. Naturally Trent would not know. He would expect me to be the person he had employed six years earlier. It's true I had been independent-minded then, but that had been from obstinacy and the determination to get my way. Now, whatever I said and did stemmed from conviction. I had thought a good many things over and come to certain conclusions, and the most important of these was that I must become familiar with my own country. I tried to explain all this to him. I tried to tell him that all the people in our country who during the past hundred years had sweated and struggled to become nearly English would soon find it had been a hollow race and that there was no longer a prize at the end of it.

" 'My learning to spin or not learning isn't half as important as your attitude and the firm's attitude toward it,' I said.

" 'What do you mean?' he asked me.

" 'Because, in the end, the firm's own strength derives from its understanding of trends in this country, and especially because it is one of the oldest firms here.'

"When I was leaving, he said: 'I still think you ought to come to Calcutta, but since you are doing so well where you are we shall leave you there for the present.'

" 'Do you think you'd like having me here, Mr. Trent? I have a knack for doing the wrong thing.'

"He slapped me on the back.

" 'You'll be all right. The Jesuits have a theory, you know: bring up a child in the way he should go, and when he is older he will never depart from it. You've had a sound education, Sanad, a British education, if I may say so. You've had six years with the firm. You won't go far wrong.'

"After that," said Sanad, "I felt considerably deflated. I felt he'd handed me a bag of lollypops and said: 'Suck them if you want to, but not too many at once or you'll be sick.' We had talked till nearly midnight. I got up to go, and he came down in the lift with me. It was a bright moonlight night, and as we stood in the drive waiting for the taxi I had ordered, I suddenly thought of the dead dog I had seen lying there years earlier. I had to tell him about it.

" 'Do you know, Mr. Trent, the night I dined with you in '42, when I was here as a probationer, there was a dog's carcass decaying here. I wondered why it had been allowed to lie here so long.'

" 'It's curious you should mention it,' he said. 'There was the devil of a row over that, and the sweeper was dismissed. He came and made an awful scene here in front of the landlord's flat, and when he knew the decision wasn't going to be reversed he got quite out of hand and cursed us all black and blue. My wife told me about it. He was a nasty piece of work.'

" 'He must have been in terror of losing his job,' I said, 'of his family going hungry.'

" 'There was no danger of their going thirsty,' chuckled



Trent. "The old rascal used to brew his own poison in his hut. Half the time he was lying around drunk. That's probably why he didn't get around to cleaning up the carcass for several hours."

"Trent and I, who had cleaned out a bottle of Johnny Walker between us during the evening, then said a friendly good-night to each other and I went on my way."

"So all is well with you and Selkirk and Lowe?" I said in some relief. I had not realized till then how much anxiety Sanad's indecision had caused me.

"Of course," said Sanad, sounding surprised. "Were you worried?"

The gap of a generation is sometimes a yawning abyss between two people. There was no use trying to bridge it. Instead, I brought mango juice for Kusum and Sanad and, when they had drunk it, sent them home. They did not want to linger, and they did not invite me to dine with them or to meet them at the Club the next day. They had completely forgotten my existence as they left my garden.

"Have you seen all you wanted of the fair?" Sohan Bhai asked me the next evening.

"I thought it was being wound up," I said.

"It has been extended," he told me. "Let us go this evening. I have to take the night train home."

As we walked through the fair grounds, going from pavilion to pavilion, I was filled with a sense of well-being. We looked at the baskets, the coloured straw matting, the articles of copper and silver, the carved woodwork, the toys and knickknacks. The things did not matter. What mattered was that they were there, assembled with artistry and patience. What mattered was the surge of enthusiasm which had brought them there by the cartload. Men, women, even children had sat by the hour fashioning them, filling in time that would otherwise have been idly spent, plying the crafts of their ancestors, and here was this display to prove that an-

cient skills flourished and were not forgotten. The machine age had not robbed the people of their prowess or their faith. The *kisan*'s art would survive as long as he himself survived.

The polo grounds were ringed about by a circle of tall trees, and beyond them rose the smoke of the mills and factories. But here within this peaceful circle were the enduring things, the immemorial Indian things, tranquilly displayed. To me each painted toy and article of wood was a symbol of courage and the determination to survive. I think Sohan Bhai felt as I did. We did not talk as we walked around. There was no need for words.

Afterward we collected his luggage and I went with him to the station. I stood on the platform for a long time after the train had left, unconscious of the din around me, still filled with the peace of our walk together.

On the way home I passed the Club. It was the dinner hour, and the front rooms were deserted as I strolled through them. The hall was shadowy, but through the gloom I could see Sir Charles Kittering, rigid and unrelenting on the wall.

"It is time to relent, Sir Charles," I said softly. "A hundred years is a long time. There have been so many changes, more than you could have dreamed. And do you know, Sir Charles, the natives are swarming all over the polo grounds?"

I turned to leave, and saw the dining-room steward in the doorway staring at me, his dark face incredulous.

"Yes?" he asked. "Sir?"

"Nothing," I assured him.

It was a relief to escape. Outside the Club the hot, jasmine-scented darkness embraced me. The stars lighted my way home.

## GLOSSARY OF INDIAN WORDS

*achchā*—very well.

*arati*—a prayer accompanied by the gesture of passing a candle or other flame around the object of worship.

*arē kambakht*—O fatherless one.

*ashrama*—a community founded for a religious purpose.

*babu*—clerk.

*bairag*—renunciation.

*bania*—a merchant dealing usually in grains. *Bania* is also a caste appellation for all who are in the business world.

*bara sahib*—big sahib; the expression applies either to an Englishman or to an Indian who considers himself very grand.

*behen*—sister

*bhaiya*—an affectionate term meaning “brother.”

*Bharat Mata*—Mother India.

*chapattis*—unleavened bread.

*chaprassi*—a *peon* (office messenger) who also works part-time at his employer's house as a domestic servant.

*charkha*—spinning-wheel.

*chota peg*—a small measure of whisky.

*chowkidar*—watchman.

*C.I.D.*—Criminal Investigation Department corresponding to the *F.B.I.*

*dān*—to give in charity.

*diya*—a small earthen lamp containing a wick dipped in oil, used for Divali illuminations.

*dhobi*—a laundryman.

*dhoti-kurta*—one of the national dresses for men in India. The *kurta* is the upper garment, a long loose shirt; the *dhoti*, the lower garment, is several yards long and has to be draped in a particular way.

*dhotiwalla*—a derisive term applied to a man who wears a *dhoti*.

*Ganga-jal*—water from the Ganges.

*ghee*—clarified butter.

*goonda*—ruffian.

*gora*—a white man; this word was frequently used to refer to the British soldier.

*gram*—chick-peas.

*gulmohur*—a tree with flame-colored blossoms.

*guru*—teacher.

*gymkhana*—a word used by the British in India for sports events; a *gymkhana* club is a sports club.

*Hanuman*—the King of the Monkeys, who helped Rama to rescue Sita from Ravana in the story of the Ramayana.

*Hindi*—a Sanskrit-derived language of Northern India.

*hookah*—a water pipe.

*I.C.S.*—Indian Civil Service. The highest administrative service created by the British, it was the top rung of officialdom.

*Id*—a Muslim festival. The expression "Moon of *Id*" means a rare occurrence.

*ji-huzoor*—yes, sir.

*kabab*—a meat cake.

*karma*—action.

*katori*—a small bowl in which food is served.

*khaddar bhandar*—centre where hand-spun, hand-woven cloth is sold.

*khadi*—hand-spun, hand-woven cloth.

*kisan*—peasant.

*koi hai*—literally "Is anyone there?"—a summons to a servant. The expression was a common one in British India to denote a man in authority, the "top dog."

*Lat-sahib*—the Governor of a province.

*loo*—the hot wind that blows in North India in the summer months before the monsoon.

*luddoo*—a sweetmeat shaped like a ball.

*maidan*—a big, grassy area: what is known as "the common" in England.

*mali*—gardener.

*mem*—a white woman.

*M.L.A.*—Member of the Legislative Assembly.

*munshi*—accountant.

*mushaira*—an assembly of poets who meet for the purpose of reciting their own verses. This is a frequent happening in the United Provinces, which is considered the home of Urdu poetry.

*namaskar*—a greeting accompanied by the gesture of folding the palms together.

*nimboo-pani*—an Anglicized term for lemonade.

*nivar*—the sturdy cloth webbing of which Indian beds are made.

*pān*—a leaf smeared with betel and flavoured with lime, cardamom, areka nut, and sometimes tobacco and other things. It is usually

- eaten after meals, but is often offered to guests as a gesture of hospitality as a drink might be offered in the West.
- pān-dān*—the box, usually of brass or silver, in which *pān* is kept.
- pānwalla*—man who sells *pān*.
- puja*—the ceremony of worship.
- puris*—are made of flour and fried in *ghee*. When ready, they resemble golden-brown puffs and are eaten with vegetables.
- pyjama-kurta*—one of the national dresses for men in North India. The *kurta* is the upper garment, a long loose shirt; the *pyjama* is the lower garment.
- rāg*—melody; also a technical term in Indian music.
- safa*—a headgear made of a length of material wound around the head at an angle. It does not fit the head squarely, as the Indian turban does.
- sanyasi*—a holy man, one who has renounced the world.
- Sarkar*—authority or government.
- sāvan*—the rainy season.
- shastras*—the Hindu scriptures. "Shastra" is one such holy book.
- shervani*—knee-length coat with a high Russian-type collar, buttoned all the way down.
- shikar*—a shoot.
- swadeshi*—anything made in India. The word literally means "of one's own country."
- tabla*—a type of drum used in Indian music.
- takht*—a low wooden divan, usually covered with a cushioned mattress and cushions.
- takli*—a small instrument used for spinning cotton thread by hand.
- tamasha*—performance.
- tanpura*—an Indian stringed instrument.
- tarkari*—vegetable.
- thal* or *thali*—a round tray from which Indian food is eaten.
- tika*—mark of red powder worn on the forehead.
- tonga*—a two-wheeled, horse-drawn carriage.
- Urdu*—a language of Northern India, derived from Arabic. The spoken language of the North is commonly a blend of Hindu and Urdu known as Hindustani. However, each has its own script and, when spoken in its pure form, is quite different from the other.
- Vilayat*—England. The term sometimes refers to Europe in general.
- zemindari*—the ownership of land.



















